

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE VOODOO SPELL





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
VOODOO SPELL**

The sight of a straw doll triggers breathlessness and excessively rapid heartbeats, ancient rituals and magic—all in the middle of sunny California! Al Parker, a successful music producer, doesn't believe any of these. But then he finds himself falling under the spell of Voodoo—and he faces one attack after another as someone demands his death. Jupiter, Pete and Bob, the three detectives from Rocky Beach, do their best facing a strange phenomenon, and going against an unknown opponent.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Voodoo Spell

*Original German text by
André Minninger*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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by
André Minninger
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Cover art by
Aiga Rasch

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1. Thick Fog

Bob Andrews felt an uncomfortable pain in his throat. There was a thick fog around him. He sat in the steam sauna with his towel and took a deep breath of the soothing eucalyptus vapours. The detective had been suffering from an unpleasant cold for days and hoped to finally be freed from it by intensive sweating.

Bob thought he was alone in the tiled sauna. Sluggishly, he sat cross-legged, wrapped in hot clouds of haze, and was pondering his thoughts. He was angry, because the holidays had started yesterday, and while his two friends, Jupiter and Pete, had gone to the beach on their bicycles, he had to sit here and try to cure his flu as fast as possible.

Suddenly he flinched in horror. Out from the thick steam came the gasping breath of a man which slowly turned into a tortured moan. Bob looked around anxiously and narrowed his eyes. He was trying to see something. But the fact that he had taken out his contact lenses before going to the sauna and was surrounded by the fog like a waving mass made a clear view almost impossible.

"Hello?" Bob shouted anxiously. "Who's there?"

His words echoed from the walls, and the silence that followed, despite the high temperatures in the sauna, chased an ice-cold shiver down his spine. Strenuously, he listened. But now there was nothing to be heard except for a few drops of water that fell to the floor in some corner of the room, barely perceptible. Then he heard the sound of bare feet on a tiled floor.

The sauna door was quietly opened and closed again. Bob breathed a sigh of relief.

There was that gasping sound again! But now it got louder. Again bare feet were patted on the tiled floor, this time it sounded more laborious, seemed to slowly approach him.

Startled, Bob jumped up. He had to get out of here! He had to get help! In the fog he located the partially glazed sauna door and rushed towards it. His feet found no support on the smooth floor tiles. He almost slipped, but at the last second he regained his balance and grabbed the door handle. At that moment his legs stumbled over an obstacle and Bob hit the tiles lengthwise. A hand groped for his leg and clasped his ankle.

"Help!"

Bob looked down in horror and stared into the painful face of an older man.

"Get me... out... boy... I can't get... air!" Exhausted, the man released his hand from Bob's ankle, his breath rattled, in short bursts.

Bob opened the sauna door and pressed his foot against it. Then he reached under the man's shoulders and slowly pulled him out of the steaming room.

"For goodness sake! What happened?" An employee rushed along and knelt anxiously next to the man who was breathing heavily.

"He couldn't breathe!" Bob explained. Relieved, he noticed that the gasping breathing of the man slowly calmed down again.

"Are you all right?" the employee asked. "Should we take you to the hospital or call a doctor?"

"No, no! Not a doctor, not a hospital! I'll be okay in a minute..." The man struggled to sit down upright on a chair, slowly slipped backwards until he leaned his back against the

wall, groaning. "I've got a lot of work to do. I can't possibly let the Wet Boys down!"

"The who?" The employee looked at him questioningly.

"You don't know the Wet Boys?" The man laughed in agony. "Well, maybe you're past that age. Every teenager raves about them. The boys have..." A violent coughing fit interrupted his explanation. "The boys have fully caught the spirit of today with their music and are still far from reaching the peak of their career!" Another coughing fit ended the press release.

"A music band? I'm more interested in sports." The employee looked at the man without understanding and straightened up again. "But I see you're feeling better. That's the main thing. You two scared the hell out of me. Well, if you don't need any more help, I'm going back to my work, Mr...?"

"Parker. Al Parker," the man replied and stroked his hand over his forehead. "Don't worry about me. I'm feeling better again!" And he added a little sheepishly: "Everything is fine. Wonderful."

The employee smiled briefly and then disappeared into one of the countless narrow corridors of the spacious sauna area.

Bob also stood up again and looked with interest at the man who had introduced himself as Mr Al Parker. He was about mid-thirties, slim, tall, with a narrow face, framed by a three-day beard. "Excuse my directness, but are you really the Mr Parker who produces the Wet Boys?"

"That's right. I'm their producer, lyricist and composer." The man shook hands with Bob. "But first of all, I want to thank you for your quick help. I almost suffocated in there! I can't imagine what would have happened if you hadn't been there. What's your name?"

"Bob Andrews, sir," Bob replied, embarrassed. "The help was a matter of course. Don't mention it."

"You can safely leave out the 'sir'. I won't let my saviour call me that. Just call me Al!"

"Sure." Bob took a short break. "Would it be too pushy if I asked you what happened to you earlier in the sauna? I mean, please don't get me wrong, but does this shortness of breath affect you often?"

Al Parker flinched. For a while he looked at the ground helplessly. "Well, you've probably hit a sore spot. And frankly, I don't really want to talk about it. And even if I did now... you wouldn't believe me."

"It would be a matter of trying. But if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, of course."

Al gave a friendly wave. "I am truly indebted to you, Bob, and I would consider it an honour to return a favour for your rescue effort. But there are things I have to deal with all by myself. And that includes, among other things, certain symptoms that got me into trouble," he pointed to the door to the steam sauna, "in there."

Bob gave Al a puzzled look.

Al then continued: "Sorry... that sounded a bit more exciting than it really is! But how can I tell you about something that I am not yet clear about myself? I'll probably have to see a doctor soon. But first I'm going to sit in my studio and promote the Wet Boys's career!"

Al rose and slipped into his bathing sandals, which he had put down in front of the sauna door. "Are you interested in music?" he asked.

"Interest would be an understatement," Bob replied effusively. "Besides school, I work at Sax Sandler's music agency. It arranges bands, concert stages, organizes tours and everything else that is somehow connected with music. This job is kind of my hobby. And music is my

passion. While my main activity is dealing with something completely different. Together with my friends Jupiter and Pete I run..."

"Excellent!" Al cut Bob off. "If you and your two friends would like to be part of a music production with the Wet Boys, come and visit me. I have my recording studio in my own four walls and I would be happy if I could thank you in this way!"

Bob beamed while Al gave him a friendly hand to say goodbye. "I accept this offer gratefully! Jupiter and Pete will be thrilled!"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a business card here. But the phone book will have my address and phone number." Mr Parker's breath came back rattling and in short bursts. A look into his face showed Bob that the music producer was getting worse again. He offered to help, but Parker refused and opened the door to the rest room.

Bob had sweated enough that afternoon. He also suddenly felt thirsty. He took his things from the locker, put on his clothes and ordered a Coke at the bar, which he immediately drank standing up and with quick gulps. There wasn't much going on. Besides him, there was only one guest at the bar.

Bob decided to go outside to catch some of the warm afternoon sun. He was almost at the door, and suddenly he was overcome by the indistinct feeling that he had forgotten something important. Only what could it have been? Thoughtfully he looked at his damp hair in a large mirror and suddenly he realized he forgot his towel! He had left his new towel in the sauna!

He quickly turned around and after a few steps stood in front of the half glazed door of the steam sauna. He opened it, entered the foggy room and looked for the place where he had been sitting a few minutes ago. His hands glided over the wet tiles, groping and finding them after only a few seconds. Bob put the towel around his shoulders and turned to the door.

He hadn't come two steps yet when he stepped on a strange object. He bent over and grabbed the object. As he held the object close to his eyes, he stopped for a brief moment. In his hand he held a small doll, made of an unusually rough fabric. In his opinion it was jute, but he wasn't quite sure. Bob got curious. He quickly left the steam sauna.

When he stepped outside, he took a closer look at the doll from all sides. The material it was made of was actually jute, and its limbs and head were apparently sewn together by hand. The seams were crooked. The doll was stuffed with straw, which stuck out at the arms and legs in long tufts. But the strangest thing about it was its grim, malicious face, painted with fabric paint down to the last detail. Bob was so perplexed, it took his breath away for a moment. The face that the artist had so precisely applied to the linen-covered head was a portrait drawing. It almost reminded him of photorealism.

Bob immediately recognized the features on the primitive doll's head. It was the face of Al Parker!

2. A Strange Find

A few hours later, Bob was in an old mobile home trailer at The Jones Salvage Yard with his two friends, Jupiter and Pete. The trailer served as the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

Bob told them in detail about his encounter with the music producer Al Parker. The strange rag doll was lying on the table in front of them and had already endured examinations. But the result did not bring The Three Investigators any new knowledge.

“Believe me, friends!” Bob looked at Jupiter and Pete closely. “The face of this doll resembles Al Parker to the last detail. I bet he lost that doll in there.”

The First Investigator once again took the strange object from the sauna into his hand, turned and turned it and pressed the rag doll with his index finger in its soft belly. “All right, Bob. We believe you. The only question is why did the man take a doll with his likeness into the steam sauna and then left it lying there?”

“How do we know it actually belongs to him?” Pete asked sceptically. “After all, this Mr Parker is a grown man. At this age, you don’t carry a doll around with you anymore. And certainly not in the sauna—unless he’s not ticking properly.”

“He didn’t really make that impression on me,” Bob replied. “Besides, Parker’s got both feet firmly on the ground. He produces, writes and arranges the music of the Wet Boys—with increasing success. It’s a tough business!”

Jupiter had put the doll back on the table. He turned its face down so he wouldn’t have to look at it anymore. The level to detail that had been applied to the facial features of the doll made him uncomfortable. “I’m aware of that. And the longer we discuss it, the more we get carried away into absurd speculations, which would ultimately lead to no reasonable result. And if you look at it closely, this Mr Parker can carry around as many dolls as he wants, after all, that’s his private affair. Maybe it’s a harmless quirk of his.”

Pete rose from his chair. He also did not feel well in the presence of the doll. He stepped up to the window and took a look outside. It was already dark. A thought came to him and he tried to keep the conversation on a factual level. “That rag doll could just as easily be his talisman—an object that makes him believe in safety, success and health. And from which he may not separate himself from, even in the steam sauna.”

“No, that’s not Parker’s style either,” Bob replied. “This all seems rather strange to me. However, if you are correct in your theory, Pete, it would be our duty to return this talisman to him. And we have to do it immediately!”

“Nothing stands in the way of that, Bob.” Jupiter bent to the side and switched on the computer from his chair. “You put in the California Resident Data CD-ROM in the computer, we’ll have Al Parker’s address and phone number.”

Bob took the small silver disc out of its plastic box, inserted it into the drive and pressed some keys. He did not have to wait long until the desired information appeared on the monitor. “There it is—Parker, Al. 17 Source Street, Thousand Oaks, and his phone number. I’ll call him right now.”

“Wait, wait a minute!” Jupiter cried.

“Huh, why Jupe?” Bob looked at the First Investigator questioningly.

“Don’t tell Mr Parker about the doll first. Wait until he asks you if you have stumbled over this doll in the sauna or other whereabouts. If the doll belongs to him and he actually took it with him to the sauna, then it is really important to him and he would ask you directly. After all, you two were the only guests in the sauna.”

“That’s undoubtedly true, Jupe,” Bob confirmed as he noted Al Parker’s address in his notebook. “So when he comes up with the subject on his own, we’ll find out from him what this weird doll is all about.”

Jupiter pushed the phone over to Bob.

“What if Mr Parker keeps his mouth shut on the phone?” Pete asked. “Then what does that tell us?”

“If he doesn’t mention the doll, then we can assume there’s something wrong,” Jupe said. “And in this case, I’d rather confront him directly with the doll to observe his reaction.”

“I’ve understood everything so far.” Bob took his sunglasses off his nose and polished the lenses with a corner of his T-shirt. “There is only one question—under what pretext shall I call him? Sure, he invited us. But isn’t it a bit bold to drop by his house just a few hours after my first meeting with him?”

Jupiter frowned. “Has that ever bothered us? You can tell him that we were so excited about his offer to look over his shoulder while working with the Wet Boys that we urged you to make an appointment with him. After all, it’s the holidays now and Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw happen to be die-hard fans of the Wet Boys! You’re never short of an excuse, Bob!”

Pete made a face. “Strictly speaking, the Wet Boys don’t appeal to me. You can argue about the music and the lyrics, but looking at how those three guys fiddle around on stage, no thanks!”

“Don’t let Al Parker know that, Pete,” Bob warned. “Who knows, maybe he’ll chase us out without letting us take a look at his studio. But I’m really looking forward to his high-tech chamber. The industry whispers that his studio is one of the most elaborate in California. Numerous superstars record their albums there.”

Pete stayed calm. “Don’t worry about it, Bob. I’m going to get the Wet Boys’s new CD tomorrow and be an enthusiastic fan at Mr Parker’s!”

“You don’t have to!” Bob quipped. “It won’t even be necessary to put on so much effort. You’ll like the man, I’m sure of it.”

Bob twitched his legs restlessly and noticed that Jupe lifted the receiver from the phone and handed it against him. “Well then, Bob. Don’t take too long to ask.”

Pete pressed the loudspeaker button and supported his chin in both hands in a wait-and-see attitude, while Bob dialled and pressed the receiver to his ear with tension. “I hope he’s home, too!”

There was a ringing tone. Then the call was answered by a friendly male voice. “One moment, please... Al! Your call!” In the background modern hip-hop music could be heard, which suddenly ended abruptly.

Then steps approached and the phone was picked up again. “Yes?”

“Hi, Al! This is Bob!”

“Bob! That was faster than I expected! Sorry to keep you waiting, but I’m in the middle of a mix. Are you all right?”

“I wanted to ask you the same thing. How are you?”

Mr Parker hesitated for a moment before euphorically shouting to the listener: “Everything’s fine! Wonderful!”

Jupiter looked at Bob silently and shook his head demonstratively. The statement of the music producer did not sound very convincing to him. "And do you still have breathing difficulties?"

"Thank you for asking. I'm so absorbed in my work, I didn't even think about it. And that's a good sign, isn't it?"

"You can see it like that," Bob relented. "But you'll know what's best for you."

Mr Parker took a deep breath. Bob used this moment for his cause. "Al, my friends Jupiter and Pete, whom I told you about this afternoon, have asked me to call you immediately! The two of them are very eager to check out your famous recording studio, and the three of us would like to visit you!"

"Well excellent! When would you like to come?" Al asked.

"How about tomorrow?"

"And at what time?" the music producer asked friendlily.

"Uh... so... I... uh...", Bob started stammering. "I mean... we're on vacation. We can come any time."

"Great! Then why don't you come by tomorrow morning, say, at eleven o'clock?"

The First and Second Investigators nodded at Bob enthusiastically.

"That sounds good!" Through the loudspeaker, the three of them heard a soft squawking and scribbling. Apparently Mr Parker wrote the appointment in his notebook. "Well, you've got my address. See you tomorrow. I'm happy!"

"So long, Al!" Bob hung up.

"Well, what do you say now, partners?"

"Ideally nothing," Pete replied. "I really didn't expect that reaction." The Second Investigator reached for the rag doll and crushed the soft, straw-filled body with his hands. "I don't like this doll. The face was painted with great care. It does not match the shapeless and lovelessly cobbled together body. Somehow this thing gives me a creepy impression."

"I can calm you down, Pete." Bob patted Pete on the back. "The real Al Parker doesn't look as grim as this doll here."

"At least it wasn't meant for children. So much is certain for me," Jupiter remarked, pinching his lower lip. "No child could sleep peacefully with this doll. It'd be more like a nightmare. Whoever made this thing has no childlike mind at all. I would even say that there is something threatening about this doll."

Bob yawned tiredly. "Tomorrow we'll know more about that. I'm absolutely certain of that." Jupiter and Pete agreed with their friend and decided, given the late hour, to end their meeting.

When they left Headquarters a short time later, the strange rag doll was still lying on the table. The full moon shone in through the window like a pale skull and made the doll's grim face appear almost alive.

3. In the Music Studio

Sourge Street was a small quiet side street in the west—in the artists' quarter of Thousand Oaks. There were no mansions or luxury apartments here. Instead, the houses were simple, whose inhabitants had made a lot out of the partly dilapidated and run-down dwellings through their own initiative and with a lot of imagination.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob stood punctually that morning at eleven o'clock at the garden gate of house number 17 and looked at the grey one-family house, whose porch was adorned with countless pots of palm trees, flowers and cacti. In the midst of this botanical splendour, a cosy sitting area with garden furniture had been built. On the table stood used breakfast crockery, on which now some wasps cavorted and made themselves over the remainder of a bitten bread roll.

The Second Investigator took a critical look at the domicile of the music producer—the plaster was already crumbling off in many places on the outer walls. But before he could say anything, Bob waved off with a clear gesture. "Don't say it, Pete. I can tell by the tip of your nose. You're quite surprised, if not horrified, by Al Parker's house!"

"I have to admit that I imagined this to be a little more noble," Pete replied. "I mean, I think this place is great, but would you have expected there to be a super high-tech studio in this modest house? What kind of guy is this Al Parker?"

"We'll know in a few minutes." Jupe opened the wooden garden gate and walked briskly along the gravel path to the house. Bob and Pete followed him until the First Investigator suddenly stopped outside the front door, turned to his two partners and looked at them with a surprised expression.

"Safety is definitely not a priority here," he remarked dryly, pointing to the entrance door, which was unlocked and moved back and forth in the light breeze.

"If I didn't know we were in the right place, I'd agree with you, Pete," Bob said. "A recording studio where big stars come and go should be better protected from the fans and the curious press. But the address is correct."

Bob pointed to the nameplate next to the bell and pressed the button with determination. A loud bell rang. The seconds passed.

But nothing moved. The First Investigator stepped restlessly from one leg to the other.

"Well, what is it?" Pete asked impatiently. "Shall we just go in?"

Bob pushed the door open carefully and put his head in the hallway. On the walls hung countless golden long-playing records in removable frames. "Al! Hello! Are you home?"

"Ring again, Jupe!" Pete asked the First Investigator.

Jupe pressed the button again. Again the loud bell rang through the house, until suddenly a door opened at the end of the hall, through which Al Parker stepped out and called: "I'm back here, friends! Come on in!"

The three did not wait long and eagerly walked towards the door, above which flashed an elongated red light with the word 'Recording' written in black letters.

"Welcome to my music studio!" Al Parker shook hands with them.

Bob introduced his two friends. Then with a sceptical look, he pointed to the front door. "Do you always leave your front door open, Al?"

The music producer grinned. "That's my philosophy," he explained. "Open doors keep unwanted visitors away."

Pete gasped audibly. "How can you explain that?"

"Don't you want to take a look around?" Al Parker suggested. "I will gladly tell you more about my outlook on life later, if you are really interested. But first you do want to see my high-tech chamber, don't you?"

The Three Investigators nodded, whereupon the music producer turned around on the heel and led them into his workroom.

Here the windows were covered with dark curtains. Radiant halogen lamps hanging from long wires and running along the ceiling cornice of the room illuminated the huge desk with a mixing console. Bob was amazed and forgot to close his mouth with enthusiasm. He had seen many recording studios from the inside while working for Sax Sendler's music agency, but this one exceeded his expectations by far.

"This studio is my pride and joy!" Al Parker pointed with a gesture around the room. "Last year, I said goodbye to analogue recording technology and converted my entire studio to digital."

Pete looked at the music producer in astonishment. "Analogue recording technique? What does that mean?"

"With this now obsolete method, the sound impulses were transmitted directly to magnetic tape, which always had some background noise even with the best quality, leaving the sound engineer only a little leeway in post-processing. With the digital process, however, all sound pulses are converted into computer-readable signals. These can be changed as desired, so that you have almost unlimited possibilities to utilize the recorded material. This can lead to completely different end results."

"I don't see any tape machines standing around," the First Investigator found out. "Did they fall victim to the digital age?"

"That's right. I am no longer dependent on those equipment," Al Parker proudly announced. "A computer with a powerful processor now does the work. How much time do you think that saves? I only have to think back to all the hours I used to spend winding the tapes back and forth."

"The red light over the door there is still on," Pete noted. "Are you in the middle of a recording?"

"Correct," replied the music producer and moved two controls of the mixing console to the middle position. Hip-hop rhythms sounded from the loudspeakers, the melody of which sounded familiar to The Three Investigators.

After a few bars, the chanting began with three boy voices, which Jupiter, Pete and Bob recognized immediately. It was unmistakably the Wet Boys who had their big breakthrough with this song a year ago.

"The song was number one on the charts for seven weeks," Bob revealed his knowledge. "'It's All on the Surface' was the title, right?"

Al Parker nodded.

"The song was played up and down the radio," Jupiter added. "As far as I know, over five hundred thousand copies of this CD single have been sold."

"I'm sure you've done a great job producing this song, Al. But why are you remixing it again?" Bob asked with interest.

Al Parker grinned. "The record label approached me with this request. They decided to release a remix of it after twelve months. They probably expect a similar success from this new release!"

“Of the same title?” Pete asked with scepticism, while he gazed admirably at a shelf with several gold statuettes which Al Parker had been awarded in the course of his career.

“Basically, yes.” Al Parker ran a hand across his three-day beard. “The remix differs from the original by a faster rhythm and an additional electric guitar. The singing parts of the Wet Boys remain.”

Al Parker pushed the controller of the mixing console a little higher so that The Three Investigators could feel the juicy bass of the rhythm in their stomachs. Pete caught himself with his foot unconsciously bouncing in time as the music came out of the loudspeakers. In view of the fact that the Wet Boys did not particularly appeal to him, he was quite surprised by his body’s response to the beat.

“Vocally, I quite like these guys,” Pete now confessed to the music producer. “But the choreography of this trio is in my eyes—please excuse the expression, Al—pretty ridiculous for my taste!”

A slight twitch played around the corner of Al Parker’s mouth. Pete noticed this reaction and added quickly. “But that has nothing to do with your music.”

“Dance and movement are not necessarily Pete’s interest,” Jupiter explained to the music producer. “You should have seen his performance when we were cast in a school play not so long ago!”

Al Parker laughed tensely, and Jupiter crept up on the strange feeling that Pete’s open opinion had put the music producer in a thoughtful mood for a brief moment. But then Mr Parker rose from his chair and looked at them. “I’m really not much of a host, boys. In the heat of my work, I completely forgot to offer you anything. Won’t you have a Coke with me?”

They agreed enthusiastically, and Al Parker fetched the drinks from the kitchen. Bob took advantage of this moment and pushed Pete with his elbow into the side. “You really shouldn’t have commented on the dance skills of the Wet Boys, Pete. Can’t you see how proud Al is of his charges?”

“Sorry, Bob,” Pete hissed back, crushed, and glanced cautiously at the door. “It really just slipped out of me. But you don’t seriously believe that I might have offended him with my opinion?”

“In any case, your opinion has moved something in him,” Jupiter quietly added. “In this business, however, one should not be too susceptible to criticism. Well, maybe we are dealing here with a sensitive personality who relates any negative opinions about the Wet Boys to himself. After all, he created this trio. It is, so to speak, his invention and his product.”

“Do you really think that Al...” Pete broke off his sentence abruptly. He heard footsteps and the clink of glasses on a tray. The music producer entered the studio, placed the drinks with the clinking ice cubes on a small side table and handed them the glasses.

“Lately, I’ve been toying with the idea of hiring an assistant. But then I realize again and again that I can’t impose my chaotic way of working and this hopeless mess on anybody.”

“What do you mean?” Bob asked with interest.

“Look around you!” Al Parker pointed his hand all round his studio, where all kinds of equipment piled up knee-high. “I don’t exactly have any organization here. Music sheets, CDs, cassettes, cables, magazines, and all kinds of accessories are stacked everywhere. Apart from me, nobody would be able to find their way here. You won’t believe me, but there is still a system behind all the chaos. The worst part is, I’m the only one who knows it.”

“And you haven’t got yourself a cleaning lady either, have you?” Jupiter remarked with a smile, after he had spotted a heap of used crockery on the shelf, the leftovers of which have dried up and stuck to the edges.

“Please don’t tease me!” Al Parker had emptied his glass and put it on the tray. “Despite—or perhaps because of—my success in my profession, I have remained a bachelor. I still haven’t learned how to keep things organized. In the depths of my heart, I must have always been a child.”

Bob hesitated at those words. Then he reached into the side pocket of his blazer, pulled out the strange rag doll from it and handed it to the music producer, who had meanwhile sat down on his comfortable executive chair again. “I found this thing in the sauna yesterday, Al. That’s certainly yours, isn’t it?”

None of the three had foreseen what would happen. Al Parker jumped up from his chair as if stung by a bee, pushed Bob, who was still holding the doll in his hand, hysterically aside! Trembling all over his body, he withdrew into the furthest corner of his studio. “For goodness sake...” he stammered, panting. “Get that thing away from me! Come on!”

Bob was so perplexed that he stood there rooted and, like Al, was unable to move. The music producer’s face muscles began to twitch uncontrollably.

His face took on a dark red colour within seconds. Then his knees kinked and Al Parker fell to the ground!

4. The Prophecy of the Witch

Jupiter snatched the doll out of Bob's hands and threw it to Pete. The Second Investigator understood immediately and quickly let it disappear into his pocket.

Al Parker lay on the floor and held his palms in front of his face.

"Get it off me! Get it away!" He screamed in fear as if he was out of his mind.

Jupiter spread out his arms and slowly approached the producer. "Al! It's all right, it's all right. Pete took the doll." The First Investigator went to great lengths to give his voice a soothing tone. "It can't hurt you..."

"Tell it to go away..." Al Parker threw an anxious look at Pete. "Get out!"

The Second Investigator was startled and looked helplessly at Bob and Jupiter.

"Al..." now Bob intervened. "I tripped over that thing in the sauna. We really didn't want to do anything bad to you. We even thought for a moment..." Bob had to swallow for a moment, "... you... you're happy we're bringing the doll back."

"It's not mine! That doll is killing me!" Al Parker was sweating and gasping for air. But then he calmed down slowly and looked at them exhausted.

"Are you all right?" Jupiter inquired.

Al Parker was still gasping and sitting on the floor. "Thank you... everything's fine... wonderful."

Jupiter helped Al Parker get up as Bob pushed a chair over to him.

"Al... this doll... what's with it?" Jupiter now spoke forcefully to the producer. "Why is this stuffed thing scaring you so much? You almost suffocated!"

Al Parker rubbed the sweat off his forehead. Then he straightened up with a groaning sound and pulled his T-shirt smooth. "These dolls... this is madness... believe me... They're trying to kill me!"

"This is really insane," Bob commented. "And anyway, what do you mean by 'these dolls'? Are there any more of these?"

"I don't know if I should talk to you about this..." Al mumbled. "Voodoo is not an issue for teenagers."

"Voodoo?" Pete took a step closer to Al Parker. "You don't really believe in this terrible magic, do you?"

"If you had ever set foot on the Caribbean country of Haiti, you wouldn't talk about it like that," the producer said slowly to Pete. "Because there is really no question of terrible magic here. Voodoo rituals are still practised there today.

"They have become the religion of the people living there. Many cult groups are in close contact with each other—fortune tellers, exorcists and magicians. They all connect with the supernatural powers of the universe and teach fear to us ignorant people, as I now have to experience first-hand."

"Do you really believe in it?" Jupiter asked carefully.

"If you had asked me that a few weeks ago, I would have clearly said no. But now..." Al Parker stopped for a moment, "... now I'm not so sure anymore..."

"Why?" Bob asked.

“Because somebody is playing with these strange dolls and my body goes crazy every time! Whenever one of these dolls shows up... then... I can’t breathe. My heart starts to race... and those stings in my chest... all those symptoms comes up. I’m not imagining it!”

“Still, the danger can’t come from the dolls, Al,” Jupiter explained. “I must confess that we have examined this thing in every detail. This fabric figure consists only of jute, a few bundles of straw and a few strings. If you really get heart palpitations, stings in your chest and shortness of breath when you see these dolls, it’s because of other circumstances, but not because of these Voodoo things.”

“From where?” Al Parker asked suspiciously.

“I can’t give you an answer to that yet,” confessed Jupiter. “It would be interesting to find out since when did you get these dolls and who gave them to you?”

The producer looked around fearfully, as if he was afraid of being watched or overheard by a stranger. “It’s been going on for about two weeks.” He lowered his voice.

“The first time I was confronted with such a doll, I came out of an evening event at the Beachside Hotel, where my record label had awarded the Wet Boys and me with two gold LPs each. Shortly after midnight I left the party and went to my car. I put my two awards on the back seat and was about to start, when I reached into my coat pocket and found this doll. At first I was only surprised and briefly thought about who might have left this toy in my coat. But I didn’t think anything of it and drove off.”

“Were you wearing the coat all along during the award ceremony?” Bob asked.

“No,” Al replied. “I left it at the coat rack. I only took it back when I left... Anyway, when I came to a stop at the next traffic light, I wanted to take a closer look at this thing and got a shock—the doll had my face! It was meticulously painted down to the last detail!”

“And then what?” Jupiter asked curiously.

“At that time, however, I hadn’t dealt with the question any further,” Al said. “It’s really not an everyday occurrence to come across a doll whose face is painted with one’s own likeness—and, what’s more, so grimly disfigured!”

“What happened next?” Pete wanted to know.

“A few days later, the bell rang at my front door in the morning. When I went to look, a small parcel was lying on my doorstep, addressed to me, but without the name of the sender. I’m sure you can imagine what was delivered to me.”

“I suppose another doll?” Bob suspected.

“That’s right.” With nervous fingers, Al Parker reached for his tobacco pouch and rolled a cigarette. “It is incomprehensible, but this time, almost immediately, I had heart palpitations and shortness of breath! That was the first time the symptoms appeared. Luckily it was over in about a minute. At that time, it did not occur to me that the symptoms had anything to do with the doll.”

The producer lit a match, lit his cigarette and blew blue smoke into the air.

“Yet another few days later, this time it was at night,” Al continued. “I was tired and ready to go to bed. After coming out of the bathroom, I saw a doll on my bed. And then, a short while later, my heart stung and the breathlessness began again although I had not touched the doll at all. The mere sight was enough—already my body went crazy! And as before, the symptoms disappeared after about a minute.”

“So that was the third time you encountered the doll,” Bob said.

“Yes, and the fourth time, you saw it yourself yesterday afternoon in the sauna, Bob,” Al said. “I sat there unsuspectingly in the steam sauna on my towel. I had my eyes closed, when suddenly someone threw this thing directly into my lap. I jumped up immediately to take on

this rascal. But the immediate pain made it impossible for me. I sank to my knees, struggled for air and couldn't move an inch."

"And earlier, when Bob pulled this doll out of his pocket," Jupiter asked. "Were you in the same pain as before?"

Al Parker hesitated. "Strange... but now that you're asking me that, I'd almost say... no."

"No?" Pete waved the cigarette smoke away in front of his face. "What do you mean?"

"I was excited and scared to death... but I didn't have heart stings this time." Al replied. "Also the shortness of breath did not appear. At least it didn't seem as violent as usual to me."

"Were you struggling with those painful symptoms before you got those dolls?" Jupiter took a sceptical look at Al Parker's cigarette, whose smoke the producer inhaled deeply.

"Not at all. My last visit to my family doctor was years ago, and I always enjoyed excellent health. Only since this Voodoo spell began have I been haunted by these terrible agony."

Al Parker nervously scraped off the ashes of his cigarette in the ashtray that was already full to the brim.

"So to summarize, you have had five encounters with the doll so far, and for three of those you've had heart palpitations," Bob said.

"Yes, now that you said it, yes," Al replied.

"What makes you think these dolls are for Voodoo spells?" Bob asked and emptied the rest of his Coke glass in one go.

"Jessica Stevens. She lives here in the neighbourhood, two blocks from here. I jokingly call her the 'witch'. I ran into her at the supermarket a few weeks ago. She is a professor of anthropology and lives mostly in Caracas. She gives many lectures at the university there."

"An anthropologist? What's that?" Pete looked at Al Parker questioningly.

"Anthropology is the study of human beings," Jupiter, as the mastermind, took over the explanation as always. "They study human societies and cultures and their development."

"Explained in an exemplary manner, Jupiter," praised Al Parker. "Mrs Stevens's main interest is African-American religions. She has travelled for a long time through the Latin American and Caribbean countries and had experienced the most eerie and hair-raising things there—things most of us haven't even heard of or read about. For her, it's clear that someone is trying to get to me with the help of Voodoo magic. She said that the procedure, these dolls and my physical seizures, are all typical characteristics resulting from a Voodoo ritual."

"I must confess, I'm not too familiar with this subject," Jupe said. "I once read that the followers of this religion in Haiti resurrect the dead and have these creatures, the so-called zombies, work for them."

"You don't really believe that, do you, Jupe?" Pete had a cold shiver running down his back. "How could that be possible?"

"Of course, these people aren't really dead," Jupiter enlightened his friend. "By a certain poison they are made seemingly dead. After they have been buried, they are brought back to life after a few days with the help of an antidote. However, this poison causes the brain functions of these people to no longer function properly and they can therefore serve the Voodoo priests as will-less tools. These poor creatures must then work for their masters, else they would be abused."

"That's terrible!" Pete cried in horror.

"But harsh reality," Jupiter explained. "Many Haitians are afraid to become living corpses. And to prevent a dead body from rising as a zombie, the heart of the corpse is

pierced before the funeral.”

“This reminds me of the Dracula novel by Bram Stoker,” Bob interrupted the eerie accounts by Jupiter.

“With the slight difference that such vampire stories are the product of fantasy. These horrible rituals, on the other hand, are a terrible reality. We should fill our Voodoo knowledge gaps as soon as possible. It seems to me that there are even worse things hidden behind this religion. If the unknown bearer of these dolls is actually a Voodoo fan, we could expect the worst. Who knows what this maniac is capable of.”

Al Parker got up from his chair and began to walk up and down the studio restlessly. “I shouldn’t have told you about this, friends. The dolls have a tremendous power. Although I don’t believe in witchcraft, but I get to feel its magic. Jessica Stevens warned me. These Voodoo dolls should not be underestimated. The anthropologist predicted that if I didn’t bow to the spell, I would have to expect much worse things to happen.”

“What did she mean?” asked Jupiter.

“She’s convinced that someone I treated unfairly is trying to take revenge on me.” Energetically, Al Parker put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

“This lady is beginning to interest me.” The First Investigator pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “I’d like to meet her in person to learn more details straight from her mouth.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” The producer looked at him seriously. “Mrs Stevens will not be able to tell you anything straight from her mouth!”

5. Two Birds with One Stone

“But... how is that possible?” Bob felt increasingly uncomfortable.

“The old lady’s fate has been a miserable one. She damaged her larynx in a terrible traffic accident,” Al explained.

“How did you communicate with her then?” Bob asked.

“She uses something called a speech-generating device. It is a small metallic box-like device which, when pressed against the neck, produces vibrations to allow speech. With its help, it is possible to continue speaking without the larynx.” Al Parker took a short break. “However, it has an unpleasant effect.”

“What’s that?” Pete was ready for anything by now.

Al Parker hesitated for a moment. “Well... this artificial voice isn’t exactly like a human voice. I have to admit that at first it took me some effort to get used to these electronic sounds. It almost sounds like a robot talking to you.”

“Hurrray for technology!” Bob shook to release his inner tensions. “I wouldn’t be too keen on such a thing. But I guess it might be necessary unless you want to shut up for the rest of your life...”

“I understand how you’re looking at this, Bob.” Al Parker removed the Wet Boys cassette from the DAT recorder and pushed it into a labelled box. “But Mrs Stevens really deserves more respect. To make matters worse, her husband died a few weeks ago. She’s been in mourning ever since. I think she intends to tear down her tents in Caracas to enjoy her well-earned retirement in California.”

“In any case, it would be very revealing to get to know Mrs Stevens personally,” Jupiter replied. “She must have a lot of interesting stories to tell.”

Al Parker looked at Jupiter in wonder. “What do you expect from it?”

The First Investigator built himself up in an important pose in front of the producer. “Al, as you mentioned so aptly earlier, the matter with the Voodoo dolls is a very serious one. I have the feeling that fate has brought us together at the right time.”

“What do you mean by that?” Al asked.

Jupiter reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a business card, which he proudly handed over to the producer. It said:



Al Parker read the text twice. Then he looked at the three boys examining them. “Is this a joke?”

“Al!” Jupiter was honestly indignant. “Given the prevailing situation, a joke would really not be appropriate. Pete, Bob and I have been doing this detective work for years. It has become more than a hobby. Even Chief Reynolds of the Rocky Beach Police Department supports us as far as he can.”

“Our special field are mystical events and secrets of all kinds,” Pete added. “We have success that will make some adults look stupid. And the events with which you are facing now are just crying out for clarification. Or are you gonna take it like that?”

“What?” Al Parker barely asked.

“Well, that this Voodoo witchcraft would make you psychologically and physically upset,” Bob supported his two friends. “Will you continue to stand idly by and wait to see what tricks this madman pulls out of his sleeve next? So far, it’s just these ugly dolls that’s got you nervously upset. But who knows what gets thrown at you tomorrow? By the way, you should also keep in mind that your creativity suffers a lot from all these magic spells. Under these circumstances, no reasonable person can even be halfway able to pursue his normal workload.”

“You’re right...” Al Parker became thoughtful. “When I think about how many hours I’ve spent alone trying to rack my brains over this whole Voodoo situation without even getting near any result, I could be plucking my hair out now. These were all precious hours that I could have used more artistically.”

“Art does have a higher value in your profession,” commented Jupiter. “But in my opinion, the first thing we should do is pay attention to the physical reactions these dolls trigger in you. You should put health before work.”

Bob took a look at the crowded ashtray.

“And maybe the first thing you should do is to stop smoking. After witnessing your choking in the sauna yesterday, every time I see you reach for a cigarette, I get worried for you!”

“Please don’t give me motherly advice!” Al Parker was visibly irritated. “Smoking has nothing to do with these seizures! Behind them are these cursed dolls!”

“That’s ridiculous, Al!” Bob snapped. “Whatever’s behind this has nothing to do with Voodoo magic!”

“Let’s take a look at this,” Jupiter tried to appease and turned to the producer. “Al, do you have any enemies?”

Al Parker shrugged his shoulders and thought for a moment. “Enemies? I don’t think so. Envious people, probably—people who are jealous of my success and my contacts. There’s plenty of them. But that’s nothing unusual in this industry. Times are tough. Everyone’s trying to get a piece of the big pie.”

“The big pie—do you mean the music market?” Pete wanted to know.

Al Parker nodded. “That’s right. In addition to the movie business, this is the largest source of income in the entertainment sector. Billions of dollars are being spent here. I understand there are a lot of people who want to get involved. The competition is getting tougher and tougher. Nevertheless, I can’t imagine anyone trying to push me off my road to success with Voodoo spells. This idea is truly ridiculous!”

“I’m considering this possibility, though,” Jupiter said. “If you knew what bad practices our detective company has already exposed, you’d change your mind as soon as possible. The good faith of people is the breeding ground for the most elaborate ideas and plans of criminals.”

The producer folded his arms in front of his chest, smiled and gave his voice a tone of determination. “Then take the case, boys. I don’t know what I’m getting myself into yet, but

this decision seems to me to be less risky than a possible suffocation.”

At that moment the wall clock in the studio struck twelve o’clock. Pete spun around, startled.

“Wow, Pete!” Bob whispered to his friend. “Just get a hold of yourself and save your adrenaline for later. The strange feeling creeps up on me that this case brings us to the limits of our nervous strain. I don’t like the whole story. Nevertheless, I must admit that it will be a pleasure for me to pull the hood off this Voodoo fanatic’s head and put an end to it once and for all!”

“Twelve o’clock.” Al Parker took a quick look at the wall clock. “Time for my lunch tea. Well, how about it? May I brew a cup for you?”

The three detectives agreed and followed Al Parker into his large, spacious kitchen. Jupiter, Pete and Bob opened their eyes in horror. The used crockery piled up in the sink, the dirty parquet floor was sticky and a slight smell of mould spread from the overfilled waste bin next to the fridge.

Jupiter wrinkled his nose. “You’re missing a housekeeper, Al. And you can really speak of luck that in addition to our detective work, we do a lot of clean-up work as well!”

“Are you crazy now?” Pete said, resulted in an inconspicuous kick from Jupiter. Immediately the Second Investigator tried to correct his rash statement and quickly added. “We cannot simply decide for Al that we are the ones to put his house in order.”

The producer smiled, embarrassed. “My organization is really not the best, guys, and I honestly admit that other things in life are far more important to me—music, in particular.”

“I can understand that, Al,” Jupiter replied while filling up the kettle and putting it on the stove. “We’ll clear up this Voodoo spell and get your household in shape. You kill two birds with one stone!”

“Well, wonderful!” Al was visibly thrilled. He reached under the middle shelf for four cups hanging from small hooks. “I must confess, I like this idea! Black or green tea?”

“Black tea, please!” the three shouted, as if from one mouth, while the producer put two tea cans on the table.

“That’s what I thought. Most visitors don’t like green tea. It’s a blessing for me!” Al Parker carried four tea bags into the cups and waited impatiently for the kettle to whistle.

Jupiter used this break for a question the producer hadn’t answered yet. “To come back to your unlocked front door again, Al...”

“Yes?”

“You were talking earlier about a philosophy of life behind this. Can you tell us more about it?”

“If you’re really interested, of course!” Al Parker leaned his back against the kitchen cupboard and began to roll a new cigarette as if it were a matter of course. “The thing is basically quite simple—locked doors seem to magically attract burglars. Open doors, on the other hand, visibly discourage them.”

“Visibly?” Bob asked irritably. “What do you mean?”

“Twice in the past few years, they have entered this house and robbed me of a lot of technical equipment. And that only because I had locked the door in these two cases. As long as I left the front door open, not even the postman dared to cross the threshold. Burglars seem to avoid open doors. Because after all, they create the impression that someone is inside the house.” The three detectives looked at Al Parker in awe.

“My philosophy may seem a little strange to you, but experience has taught me better,” Al continued. “Since I don’t lock my front door, unwanted visitors stay away.”

The whistling of the kettle interrupted the producer's lecture. Bob poured the boiling water into the waiting cups and they sat down at a corner of the kitchen.

For a long time the four talked about insignificant issues, until the First Investigator announced that he would deal with this inexplicable case with his two partners. Pete kept looking to the kitchen door during the conversation and even got up twice to look right in the hallway. He had the strange feeling that someone was watching them all the time. But there was nothing suspicious in the hall.

6. Legends and Rituals

Bob Andrews entered Headquarters, threw his jacket on the chair and let himself plop into the armchair in the usual way.

Immediately after their visit to Al Parker, Bob had set off for the library to search for information about Voodoo and its rituals. Now, two hours later, he sat opposite Jupe and Pete in the old mobile home trailer and revealed his new-found knowledge.

“When I entered the keyword ‘Voodoo’ in the computer catalogue, books and press reports were mainly listed in connection with African American religions. Translated, the word ‘Voodoo’ means god, deity or spirit. The media has turned it into a cult with ritual murders, blood sacrifices and snake charms. These legends could be traced back to a person named Spenser St. John.”

“Spenser St. John?” Pete asked eagerly. “Never heard of him. Who’s that?”

“Spenser St. John was a British consul in Haiti in the late 1800s. In 1884 he published a memoir of his experiences there, which caused public outrage with its savagely hostile account and horror stories of the Voodoo religion. With no evidence to back them up, his writings were nonetheless sensationalized and picked up by the media around the world.”

“So is there something to it?” The First Investigator was literally hanging on Bob’s lips.

“Now wait and see,” he put Jupiter in his place and continued. “In fact, Voodoo, or spelt V-O-D-O-U in Haiti, is a much misunderstood religion which has its origins in both native African religions and Christianity. Their priests do perform religious ceremonies to call or pacify spirits, provide services such as casting spells and creating potions for various purposes such as healing and protection. They also do fortune-telling and dream interpretations.

“I have to admit, Jupe, that I was pleasantly surprised by your knowledge of Voodoo and zombies,” Bob humorously said.

A contented grin slid across Jupe’s face. However, it was too colourful for Pete. “Now stop tickling each other up!” he shouted. “I’d like to know what’s going on with these creepy rag dolls. How do these things have anything to do with Voodoo?”

“I’ll get to the dolls, Pete.” Bob leafed through his papers. “Of course, the followers do have their folklore and deities, but to be honest, the common perception of the Voodoo religion is not quite correct. Typical western media depicts them negatively as an evil devil-worshipping cult indulged in witchcraft, black magic, zombies, and Satanism. Such bad publicities were through writings such as that by St. John, fiction, and movies. Strictly speaking, such myths bear little resemblance to the actual Voodoo traditions, and goes completely against their moral code, which includes not harming others.

“Over time, this religion spread to many countries in the region, including the US, particularly in Louisiana. It was from Louisiana Voodoo that the idea of ‘Voodoo dolls’ was created. A doll is made with the likeness of the intended victim and is then stuck with pins and needles to inflict pain upon the victim. Such use of dolls are unheard of in the original Voodoo in Haiti, although some are used in Louisiana Voodoo, mostly to amuse tourists. Therefore, this practice is again a popular misconception of the Voodoo religion. The only ‘dolls’ in Voodoo are figurines placed on altars, which are supposed to represent spirits.

“From history, such doll practices originated in Europe rather than Africa or the Americas. For example, when witchcraft was practised in Britain a few centuries ago, people made dolls of a witch out of anger and then pierced them with pins with the intention of breaking their bewitchment.

“Back to today, Voodoo temples also exist in New York, Miami and Canada. In the cities, a so-called family consisting of the initiated believers, often formed around the temple and its leader. All sorts of people also call on the help of the priests.”

“But for what?” Pete interrupted Bob’s report.

Bob didn’t allow himself be thrown off course during his presentation. He replied: “In principle, all human problems can be solved with the help of a Voodoo spell and its various rituals. At least that’s what the Voodoo priests claim.”

Pete grabbed his head. “It may be due to my lack of intelligence, but I still haven’t understood how this Voodoo spell actually works and—if it works—what does it do?”

“This is not so easy to understand from the reports,” Bob confessed and paused for a moment.

“In a press article, I read something about a woman who felt the power of the spirits in her as a child. She was finally trained by a Voodoo priest and learned to receive certain spirits in a trance. Since then she had her own clients in her house. A séance takes place where she gets into a trance. The spirits then speak out of her mouth and advise her clients. People come to her to ask for healing, or at least to alleviate illnesses, cleansing of evil influences, or even guidance in their business.”

“Did the article also say if the so-called spell really worked?” Jupe asked.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Bob replied. “Their success is due not least to the fact that customers believe in the effectiveness of spells. For example, the healing of physical illnesses caused by mental problems could be explained by this.”

“As I suspected...” The First Investigator thoughtfully pinched his lower lip. “So the Voodoo spell works just like a placebo.”

“I think I’m just learning today. I’ve heard of the word ‘placebo’ before. But what on earth is it again?” Pete wanted to know.

“A dummy drug that makes the patient believe that it is effective. For example, if a patient cannot find rest at night in a hospital and therefore asks for a sleeping pill, he is often given a harmless tablet containing only flour, glucose or any other harmless substance. The patient who swallows the alleged sedative assumes that he will soon fall asleep, which in most cases works.

“This method also works quite frequently for headaches. Through pure faith and the power of the spirit, the pain disappears without the addition of medication. This connection between body and mind is known as psychosomatics.”

“So this Voodoo spell probably works the same way! Only that this placebo, in our case the doll, makes the victim ill—and not healthy,” Bob said and scratched his chin deliberately.

“I’ll take that, too,” Jupe said. “But we can’t be sure of that, because science is still in its infancy.”

“What is certain—judging by the press reports—is that these dolls pose a terrible, if not fatal, threat to the people to whom they are intended for,” Bob explained. “However, only if the victim believes in the spell.”

After these words, the three detectives sank into a thoughtful silence.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Pete put in after a while. “Al Parker has stated unequivocally that he does not believe in Voodoo spells. How can it be that the creepy dolls still inflict this terrible pain on him?”

“That’s exactly the point we should be looking into, fellas.” Jupe was confident. “Tomorrow we will besiege Al Parker’s house and keep an eye on every nook and cranny. This unknown Voodoo priest will get the shock of his life!”

When Pete took a look out of the window of the trailer, he suddenly collapsed in shock! For a fraction of a second, he thought he was being watched from the bushes by a glittering pair of eyes. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened it again, there was nothing there. He was not sure whether he could trust his perception or had succumbed to a sensory illusion. That’s why he kept his doubts to himself for now. But the uncomfortable feeling that made his neck hair straighten did not leave him for the rest of the day, instead it clung on to him like an evil curse.

7. The Photo Session

The next afternoon, Al Parker's front door was opened as usual. The Three Investigators entered the hallway and made themselves noticeable by loud shouting. "I'm here in the studio!" the producer's voice roared from the back room.

Al Parker jumped up from his armchair in delight when he saw Jupiter, Pete and Bob in the doorway and welcomed them. "Didn't you bring any aprons?" he asked jokingly.

"Unfortunately, we forgot them at home," Bob flattened and grinned. "Pete was dying to put on a bonnet. We could barely stop him!"

"Too bad." Al Parker smiled and took a nervous look at his schedule planner lying opened on the mixing console. "Heaven sends you! In one hour the Wet Boys will arrive for a photo session for the cover of the new Maxi-CD! And in the kitchen the dirty dishes are piling up! I can't offer them, let alone you, a clean glass anymore. It would be great if somebody help me here!"

For some unknown reason, the producer turned his attention to Bob. Before he could reply, Al Parker turned to Pete. "We'll take the photos next door in the recording room. Unfortunately I haven't had time to take care of the lights and tripods yet. I put all this stuff in the back of the broom closet—third door on the left in the hallway. You're welcome to..."

"You got it!" Pete cut him off. He rose from the black leather sofa and disappeared from the room.

Bob started by collecting the used tea cups, glasses and plates that were standing around at all sorts of places in the studio.

Al Parker was not squeamish with his distribution of work and took a look at the wall clock. Then he turned to Jupiter. "It's almost four o'clock. At this hour, I usually take my afternoon tea. I'm sorry. But I'm very particular on this. This is my English tea ceremony."

"The green variety. I already know!" The First Investigator bent down and picked up a dirty fork from the carpet that stuck out under the leather sofa. Then he went into the kitchen with Bob, while the producer was busy with his mixing console again.

"Do we really need to do this?" Bob hissed and then put the kettle on the heating plate and switched on the electric stove. "Take a look at this! This guy hasn't done dishes in at least two weeks! There are about fifty cups with tea stains in it! It'll take hours to get them cleaned. Why doesn't Al have a dishwasher?"

"Because he doesn't care," Jupiter replied indifferently. "Art is more important to him!"

"Then maybe I should introduce him to the art of dishwashing." Bob didn't look satisfied. He fervently hoped that something uncanny or unforeseen would happen immediately, so that he would be spared of this kitchen ordeal. But finally all cups wandered through Bob's dishwashing hands one by one, without anything special happening.

In the meantime Pete set up the camera lights in the recording room, while Jupiter tidied up the studio. The First Investigator wanted to stay close to Al Parker. He noticed that the producer was now extremely uncomfortable—he smiled tensely, ran hectically through the studio and was constantly looking for something. Al Parker seemed to trust The Three Investigators because he gave them a free hand and did not keep an eye on them when they were tidying up his place.

The producer just put a new film in his camera when he heard the front door close and amused voices approaching. Nervously, Al Parker rushed into the hallway. Also Bob stepped curiously out of the kitchen and recognized the Wet Boys at first glance.

The hip-hop trio looked just like he knew them from television and CD covers—their hair was short, their trained bodies were muscular and the clothes they wore were garish and contemporary, but not overdone. Only the faces—Bob couldn't help himself—looked a bit precocious and inexperienced.

The three young men were joined by a young woman carrying a handy make-up case and Al Parker shook hands effusively as he greeted his guests and led them into his studio. With a large tray, loaded with Coke bottles and freshly washed glasses, Bob followed the trio troop that surrounded and talked to the producer.

"The last TV gig in the Music Hall was awesome, Al!" The blonde boy, wearing a tight gold chain around his neck and a large golden earring, was bursting with self-confidence. "The teenagers were hysterical and screaming like crazy! We were the main attraction of the whole show. You have to watch the recording at the weekend! We are the greatest!"

"Hank's right, Al! The atmosphere in the hall was indescribable!" The smallest of the trio, whose most striking feature was his bushy eyebrows, took off his faux fur jacket and threw it on the leather sofa. "I guarantee you—the new remix will sell like hot cakes! Is there a release date yet?"

Al Parker tapped his finger on the diary planner. "Monday in four weeks, Billy. That's why I got you in for this photo session today. The record label needs the prints tomorrow at the latest."

"Photo session. Damn it!" The third member of the hip-hop trio stroked his hand over his cheek, worried. "And just today I have a big pimple on my face!"

"Don't worry, Jeffrey!" The young woman pointed with her bright red fingernails at the small make-up case. "None of your fans will be able to tell from the cover that you also have to struggle with minor blemishes. A little powder and make-up and the pop idol is ready!"

"Can I offer you something to drink?" Bob still held the full tray in his hands and looked at the guests questioningly.

"Oh, excuse me so much! I haven't introduced you to each other yet! Wait, I'll make room." With a hasty movement, Al Parker pushed a stack of papers aside so that Bob could place the tray on the table. "May I introduce my... uh..." the producer hesitated, embarrassed. He feverishly recalled the agreement the three had made with him.

"School interns," Pete came to the rescue and extended his friendly hand to the Wet Boys and the young lady. "These are my classmates Phil and George. My name is Michael!"

Bob had trouble holding back a laugh. However, the hip-hop trio paid no attention to The Three Investigators.

They smiled briefly and took their drinks without further comment. Apparently, they didn't think it was necessary to introduce themselves to the three boys. Only the woman approached Jupiter, Bob and Pete.

"Hi, I'm Joan!" she said. "Make-up artist and stylist! Without my cream, powder and make-up tricks, the Wet Boys would be looking pretty old today. And Hank, Billy and Jeffrey, they're pretty vain birds. Not unjustified, as you can see. They're all at their feet!"

This remark caused Pete's toenails to bend upwards. This hip-hop trio had been unappealing to him from the start, and now that he was only half a metre away from them, he only felt his aversion confirmed.

"Have I told you I'm probably going to get an apartment in Beverly Hills?" Jeffrey said in a show-off tone, flicking his fingers casually. "With its own sauna, training room and

swimming pool in the basement! My agent found a great deal for me there.”

Billy approached the wall shelf and critically inspected Al Parker’s gold awards. “I just don’t understand you, Al. You’re really in the money now. But when you look at your place here, you give the impression that you are financially crawling on your gums. Of course, your studio is first-class high-tech—everyone can see that! Everything at its finest. But why can’t you afford anything else? You don’t have employees, you drive an old rickety car, the plaster is peeling from the wall and you never travel! I don’t get it.”

“There are things that mean more to me, Billy. Luxury isn’t everything.” The producer reached for his tobacco pouch and rolled a cigarette.

“Even when you’re smoking, you don’t have filter cigarettes. Here, Al, take one of mine.” Billy pulled a silver cigarette box out of his shirt pocket, opened the lid and offered it to Al Parker.

The producer waved thanks. “Nice. But I’m sticking with my tobacco.”

But Jeffrey wouldn’t let up. “Get yourself something, Al. After all, you only live once and the last shirt has no pockets. Do you want to die one day and leave everything to your bank?”

Billy laughed mockingly as Jeffrey continued: “But fine, it’s your life. I’m not getting involved. As soon as I have moved into my apartment in Beverly Hills, you are welcome to visit me and have a private sauna. It has a far more classy ambience than your public sauna club!”

Al Parker lit his cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

“Honestly, Al, why don’t you treat yourself to something?” Jeffrey went on drilling. “Or are you just stingy?”

Jeffrey’s jibes slowly became unpleasant for the rest of those present. Joan was the first to put an end to it. Demonstratively she opened her little make-up case, took a small powder can from it and asked Jeffrey to follow her into the recording room to start the make-up procedure.

When the two had left the room, Billy patted the producer on the shoulder. “Don’t take it seriously with Jeffrey, Al! He’s obsessed with fame and glory right now. That’s the fault of the screaming girls. They make him feel like a king.”

Al Parker didn’t respond. He just sat there and thoughtfully blew the smoke of the cigarette into the air. That irritated Billy. “Hey, Al... is everything okay?”

“How... what...? Uh... of course... everything’s fine. Wonderful!” The producer got up from his armchair, grabbed the camera and went with Hank and Billy to Joan and Jeffrey in the recording room to start taking the photos. Jupiter, Pete and Bob stayed outside. Al Parker had offered them to sit in front of the mixing console so that they could watch everything through the large connecting window.

After the producer had closed the soundproof door to the recording room behind him, Pete could finally let his displeasure run free. “That Jeffrey guy really sucks! How can he be so pompous and successful at the same time? Will someone explain this to me?”

“Life is often unfair,” Jupe said dryly and poured a Coke into his glass.

The Three Investigators could see through the glass how Al Parker switched on the lights and adjusted the light cones. Jeffrey still didn’t seem to have calmed down. He excitedly talked to the producer and gesticulated wildly with his hands. Curiously, the three watched the event, but without being able to hear a word of it.

“How I would love to be in there now and hear what they are talking about,” Pete said quietly.

“Don’t despair—ask Bob Andrews!” Bob said. “Sax Sendler taught me the function of a mixing console years ago.”

Bob took a quick look at the many buttons and controls. “I think the microphones in the recording room should be plugged in.” He pressed a small switch inconspicuously and carefully pushed two controls upwards. Quiet but understandable, Al Parker’s irritated voice sounded from the loudspeaker.

“I’m getting fed up with this, Jeffrey!” Al said. “Nobody gives you as much as I do. You all know that!”

“That’s not the point,” Jeffrey replied sharply. “We have a big secret with us. How easy do you think I could talk my way out of this?”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Horrified, the producer looked into Jeffrey’s face. “Is that supposed to be a threat?”

Jeffrey laughed.

“Stop it now!” Joan stomped energetically with her foot on the ground.

“Why?” Jeffrey asked provocatively. “We’re all in the same boat. And I’m reluctant to repeat myself. Either you put another stack on the table—one hundred thousand for each of the three of us—or you’ll know what we’ll do!”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob were paralyzed with horror. They didn’t dare breathe. Al Parker began to tremble and nervously reached for his tobacco pouch to roll another cigarette.

“Guys, we can talk about anything. But not now. This is insane! Can’t you see that my interns are sitting there?”

Joan took a quick look through the window and smiled hypocritically at the three. The Second Investigator gave her back a tensed smile.

Suddenly the make-up artist came to a standstill. “Al.” Her voice hissed and was freezing. Then she pointed inconspicuously to Pete.

“Look at his face. This boy can’t fool me. You can say whatever you want. The three of them are listening to us!”

8. Dancing in Boiled Water

Bob pulled down the control of the mixing console quickly but unobtrusively. The make-up artist opened the connecting door to the studio, rushed into the room and went directly in front of the two large loudspeakers, from which no sound could be heard anymore.

“Is something wrong?” Jupiter asked. The three of them forced each other to look as uninvolved as possible.

Joan smiled forcedly, exposing the gums of her upper jaw. “How about you just sit here and do nothing.”

“Doing nothing is not quite right, Joan,” the First Investigator enlightened the make-up artist. “We were observing, trying to read lips. We watched you and wondered what you had so important things to discuss that you had to close the door behind you. Are there any secrets you don’t want to get out?”

For a moment, Joan just stood there speechless and with her mouth open.

“Why did you come rushing in here like that?” Bob looked at her questioningly. “Do you need some help in there?”

The make-up artist specifically approached Pete and poked his shoulder with her finger. “Why did you look so funny?”

Pete stared at her in amazement. “Are you talking to me?”

“Who else? You can’t take me for a fool. So tell me!” Joan exclaimed.

Jupiter rolled his office chair towards Joan. “Could you be a little more specific, please?”

The make-up artist crossed her arms. “I don’t trust you from the beginning! Is listening to private conversations in the recording studio part of your duties as an intern? Shame on you!” It was at this moment that Al Parker and the Wet Boys came out of the recording room.

“Stop it, Joan!” Al said. “I’m the only one who runs the equipment here. The boys are all right.”

“Oh, yeah? You can’t fool me, Al!” Joan replied convinced. “And certainly not these teenage interns here, for whom the term discretion is obviously a foreign word! In that case, you’re too gullible. The boys now know that you’re too stingy to supply the Wet Boys with new autograph cards.”

The make-up artist turned to Jupiter, Pete and Bob. “The situation is as follows—the printed cards reveal a strictly guarded secret that should never go public. Al, of course, immediately confiscated these cards and promised to hand over the new ones to us today. The box is already in the recording room, fresh from the print shop. But Al didn’t want to unpack it until we were through with the photo session. Jeffrey didn’t like that—he wants the autograph cards now and then threatened to unpack the box himself!”

Joan wouldn’t let the three detectives out of her sight. “Jeffrey’s angry, and in a way I can understand him there, too. The fans rip dozens of the guys’ autograph cards out of their hands. We’re in urgent need of supplies.”

“What was wrong with the old autograph cards?” Bob asked straight out.

“You shouldn’t know that,” Joan pointedly at the Bob. “I already talk way too much anyway. But since you’ve already listened to us anyway, it’s better I tell you the truth before you draw any false conclusions from our arguments and spread them throughout your school.

“So listen up. The Wet Boys are the only hip-hop group on the scene whose members—Billy, Jeffrey and Hank—are all blond. On the misprints of the autograph cards, however, Jeffrey’s dark hairline is clearly visible. If the fans find out that Jeffrey’s hair isn’t really naturally blond, even though he has claimed it in numerous music shows and teen magazines, he would be branded as a liar. That would be a big shock to his female fans. You must keep absolute silent about this, and you must promise me that.” Joan looked sharply at the three detectives. “Do we understand each other?”

For a few seconds there was silence. Joan turned on his heel and, without waiting for an answer, took quick steps back into the recording room. The Wet Boys followed her. Al Parker stopped in front of the three and stroked his three-day beard with his hand in embarrassment.

“I think we’ll talk about this later,” he said quietly and then went to the Wet Boys and the make-up artist in the studio.

As the door is opened now, Jupiter, Pete and Bob could hear Al Parker giving instructions and the trigger of his camera as they watched through the large glass window. The hip-hop trio posed in all sorts of positions while the producer photographed them in rapid succession with professional skill. The make-up artist was kept busy waving her powder brush and plucking at their clothes here and there every few minutes to put the Wet Boys in the right light.

The whole procedure took unexpectedly long, and in the late evening there was still no end in sight for the photo session. The initial tension among the participants had eased somewhat. In the meantime they even laughed a few times. When the wall clock in the studio finally struck nine o’clock, Al Parker was still taking photos, but The Three Investigators decided to say goodbye.

The mood in the old MG, which the Second Investigator drove through the starry night from Thousand Oaks towards Rocky Beach, was not very exhilarating.

Bob yawned as Jupe kept pinching his lower lip and Pete, stubbornly looking straight ahead, surrendered to his anger.

“These Wet Boys and their powder puff girl are the most arrogant bunch I’ve ever met,” Pete exclaimed. “With all due respect to Al Parker, I don’t understand how a reasonable person like him can voluntarily put up with such a disgusting gang. I know this profession is mainly about business, but somehow Al Parker wanted us to know that the most important thing for him is art. How can one cooperate with such unpleasant contemporaries with such high standards?”

“As you know, taste is not something to argue about.” Bob tiredly stretched his legs as far away from himself as the space in the car would allow. “Frankly, I’m pretty divided about the Wet Boys’s product. On one point we are pretty much in agreement that those three guys—Hank, Billy and Jeffrey—look like models from a cheap mail-order catalogue—muscular, in trendy clothes and with everyday faces. They could also advertise coffee, insurance or cleaning products with their impeccable looks.

“In my opinion, these artificial figures don’t fit at all with the real hip-hop sound that originated in the poorer parts of the city, the so-called ghettos. On the other hand, I don’t think the Wet Boys’s vocal and rap performances are that bad! I go even further and dare to say I don’t know a better hip-hop band in the US at the moment.”

“It still doesn’t make the boys more likeable to me.” Pete remained stubborn and took a quick look back through the rear view mirror at Jupiter. “You’ve been pretty restrained about your comments on Wet Boys so far, Jupe. Is there a specific reason or is the leader of The Three Investigators not yet aware of whether he is enthusiastic about hip-hop music or not?”

“Honestly, I haven’t thought about that yet.” The First Investigator stared thoughtfully out of the side window into the night blue starry sky. “My thoughts are moving in a completely different direction—to Joan!”

Pete now drove on the highway and stepped on the accelerator. “Please spare me the lethal injection! Did you see her walk right up to me after she realized we overheard her conversation? I think she wanted to strangle me!”

“That’s what I’m talking about. And that brings me to a question that has been on my mind for hours.” Jupe moved a little closer to Pete and Bob from behind. “Joan had hate written all over her face. Does such a person react to three harmless interns who just wanted to listen to a conversation of their favourite band?”

Bob turned to his friend. “What are you getting at, Jupe?”

“I don’t buy the flimsy explanation of the autograph cards from the make-up artist,” Jupe said. “She didn’t know how much we heard, but the conversation was clearly about blackmail, that’s for sure. Jeffrey has threatened to reveal something if he doesn’t get a few stacks on the table immediately. We can probably assume with a probability bordering on certainty that money is involved. I find it laughable to try to make us believe that this demand is supposed to be about a stack of autograph cards.”

“Laughably so,” Bob replied. “But in a way also brilliant! Transforming within seconds a hard-hitting blackmail into a trivial teen story that makes sense, including quick reaction and a huge dose of ingenuity.”

“I paid attention to Al and the Wet Boys during Joan’s babbling,” continued the First Investigator. “The four were highly insecure and not at all up to the explosive situation. Our eavesdropping attack has stirred up a hornet’s nest. And that’s why I didn’t drill any further after the flimsy excuse with the autograph cards. We want them to believe that we’re satisfied with the lie she told us. Sooner or later, we’ll bring the truth to light. I’m quite sure of that.”

“So then you think the Wet Boys and their bitchy make-up artist are behind the Voodoo attacks, Jupe?” Pete asked.

The First Investigator dropped himself in the back seat again.

“In my opinion, the matter of the Voodoo dolls and the blackmail attempt are more or less related. Unless Al Parker’s in some kind of trouble with other people. But at the moment these are only speculations. I see only one way forward in this matter.”

“What’s that?” Pete saw the exit sign to Rocky Beach in the distance and flicked the turn signal.

“Since the producer has commissioned us to investigate the case, he will have to answer many unpleasant questions tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a pretty massive process,” Bob commented. “Do you really think Al will let us in on his private and business secrets?”

Jupiter was confident. “If the terror with the Voodoo dolls is finally to come to an end, he will have to realize that the only way to help him is to tell us the whole truth. But this decision is ultimately left to him.” Jupiter took a look at the clock in the dashboard. “We’ll know more in fifteen hours. So let’s not get bogged down in speculations and look forward to our well-deserved sleep instead.”

Bob and Pete had nothing more to add. Slowly, the first houses of Rocky Beach appeared in the distance, and in a sudden longing for his bed, the Second Investigator stepped on the accelerator.

When The Three Investigators entered Al Parker's house in the early afternoon, the First Investigator locked the front door as a precaution.

The producer wasn't in front of the mixing console in his studio this time. Instead, he was in the kitchen, where it was quite comfortable again thanks to Bob's cleaning work yesterday. He sat on the corner bench with an empty milk glass in front of him and rubbed his temples tiredly.

"Hi, Al! You're making a very tense impression. Did you work long yesterday?" Jupiter reached for the full ashtray, which stood unmistakably on the kitchen table, and emptied the contents into the waste bin.

"At four in the morning, the photos were finally done. I must have shot about twenty rolls of film. Afterwards I developed the photos in my darkroom. After all, it was eight in the morning when I sent the photos by courier to the production company. Then I fell in bed dead tired. But I think it was worth the effort." Again, Al Parker rubbed his temples and looked at the three detectives with his tired eyes that had dark edges underneath.

Jupiter, Bob and Pete sat down with the producer at the table and preferred to postpone their planned cross-examination until later. Instead, they asked Al Parker about his beginnings.

He told the three detectives that he had been in the music business for twenty years. He had begun by promoting unknown country singers from the Midwest and extend their popularity throughout the US. But when the disco wave hit the country, his western melodies were no longer in demand. He had to switch and come up with something new. It was at this time that he experienced his first great dry spell.

For seven years it seemed as if the world was no longer interested in his productions. But then he came across three talented boys in New York who earned their pocket money with rap music. He immediately realized that this musical style was facing a meaningful future. The Wet Boys were born.

While the music producer told of his past and the three listened to him eagerly, they suddenly noticed a strange rattling sound. Al Parker started up and looked around the kitchen irritated. He tried to locate the mysterious source of the noise. Jupiter pointed in amazement at the electric stove and walked slowly towards it. A large enamel pot stood on the hotplate, the lid of which had been vibrated by the rising steam.

They couldn't explain this phenomenon to themselves. During the last twenty minutes none of those present had come even one step close to the stove. The stove seemed to have turned on by itself.

As if mesmerized, the producer walked up to Jupiter, pushed him aside and took the lid off the pot with a quick movement. Screaming out loud, he immediately dropped the lid. He had burned his fingers heartily. The lid fell to the ground with a rattling sound. Al Parker ignored it. Sheer horror was written all over his face.

He stared into the pot with his eyes wide open.

Jupiter was right next to him. In the rising steam, he saw a Voodoo doll that seemed to dance in the boiling water!

9. The Witch Appears

Al Parker began to stagger and leaned on Jupiter with a painfully distorted face.

“He can’t breathe!” Pete cried.

“Sit down, Al!” Bob pushed the kitchen chair towards the producer. “Don’t just stand there, Pete! Take the pot off the hot plate and turn the stove off!”

The producer sank trembling on a chair. Bob unbuttoned his shirt and spoke to him calmly. The pain Al Parker was experiencing at that moment seemed more intense and threatening than the last time. Breathing heavily, he looked at the electric stove. “How... how is that possible? The heating plate... none of us turned it on...”

“Don’t get upset, Al! Somebody’s trying to soften you up!” Jupiter tried to reassure the producer. “Whatever’s going on here, it has nothing to do with Voodoo magic. It only works if the victim believes it! The effect is based on pure imagination.”

Al Parker grabbed his chest, his breath was intermittent. “I’m in terrible pain! I’m not imagining this! Don’t think I’m paranoid! This palpitations and this shortness of breath... that’s a fact!”

Without responding, the First Investigator opened the cutlery drawer of the kitchen table and took out a sausage tong. Armed with this tool, he bent over the hot enamel pot and fished out the softened rag doll. A small piece of paper was attached to its wrist with a rubber band, which Jupiter carefully loosened and immediately inspected. “This probably isn’t a love letter,” Jupiter quipped.

“What... what’s written there?” Al Parker rose from his chair and approached Jupiter. Pete tried to get the producer to stay seated. But he ignored his advice and instead pulled the wet piece of paper out of Jupiter’s hand. After he had read the message, he passed it on to Bob and Pete without comment. The Second Investigator looked stunned at the message. It was written in red letters:

*ARE YOU FEELING A LIFE OF TOIL?
IT’S THE DEVIL’S SOUP ON THE BOIL.
THE NIGHT OF DEATH IS ABOUT TO CALL,
AND THE EXECUTOR IS THE VOODOO DOLL!*

“Who turned on the stove?” Al Parker asked without going into the text of the message. “We all sat at the kitchen table for twenty minutes and none of us was anywhere near the stove.”

“However, we sat with our backs to the door,” Jupiter said. “None of us had our eyes on the stove. Theoretically, someone could have sneaked up behind us and turned it on secretly.”

“You can’t believe that!” Al Parker pounded the table with his fist and the ashtray and the empty milk glass jumped. Obviously, his physical condition had stabilized again. “If a stranger had been in here while we were here, we would have noticed him. After all, we still have our five senses together.”

“That’s undoubtedly true, Al,” admitted the First Investigator. “Yet none of us had direct visual contact with the stove. The intruder could have easily...”

“The intruder?” Pete interrupted Jupiter’s theory. “How could someone have entered the house unnoticed when you locked the front door after we arrived?”

“You have what?” Al Parker jumped up and hurried to the front door.

The three followed him. The producer looked at the latch that had snapped shut with astonishment and reopened it impulsively.

“I have explained to you my philosophy about open doors. How come you guys just disregard my views?”

Jupiter took a step closer to the producer. “I think I’ve clearly crossed the line,” he admitted meekly. “But I thought it would be more advisable to lock the door behind us as we were going to discuss a few important things with you. I just wanted to make sure no stranger joined in so we could talk in peace. Honestly, I’m sorry.”

Al Parker was forgiving. “It’s okay. I’m just nervous, you have to understand that. So far the bearer of these dolls has always kept away from my house. The fact that he now comes in here and ventures into my kitchen is quite a feat! But I still don’t understand why we didn’t notice him.”

“In view of the closed door, we can strike out the theory that the unwanted visitor has gained access through the front door during our presence,” Jupiter said. “The second possibility, however, would be that he entered through an open window, and we’ll check that out right now.”

“I look forward to seeing your faces, even if this theory does not live up to your expectations.” Al Parker wasn’t very confident. Nevertheless, he and The Three Investigators systematically inspected the windows in each room. The producer was right about his assumption. Nowhere in the entire house was there a window opened. They also found no indication that an unauthorized person had entered the house unnoticed in the last hour, let alone left it.

Soon after, Jupiter, Bob and Pete sat in the kitchen again with Al Parker, racking their brains about how the uninvited guest had managed to get into the kitchen without them noticing. The producer nervously reached for his tobacco pouch and rolled a cigarette with restless fingers. “It is interesting to note that your previous theories have been proven wrong. Mine, in turn, has strengthened.”

“What do you mean?” Pete asked irritably.

“I have claimed that no one has yet dared sneak into my house as long as I left the front door opened. Today you locked my front door and a stranger crept in.” The producer grabbed his head. “This is madness! Somebody’s shoving these cruel dolls at me, and my body’s going crazy!”

Al Parker’s voice picked up a hint of sarcasm. “By the way, the earlier pain has already gone. Just like that—as if nothing had ever happened! I’m starting to doubt my mind! And then I hire you as detectives, who witness an invisible man standing at my stove during our presence and cooking devil’s soup for me! If this gets out in the open, I can wrap it up. Then I’ll be put in the loony bin immediately, without further discussion!”

“It’s not you they’ll be treating for mental illness, Al, it’s the person who’s staging all this Voodoo magic,” Jupiter said with confidence. “Now, this unknown person dared to get quite close to you. Today’s attack proved that. Sooner or later he’ll fall into our trap. But before that, I have two important things to ask of you.”

The producer looked up surprised. “What’s that?”

“First, you have to promise us you’ll see a doctor. He’ll see if you’re sick after all. Given your pain, which appears and disappears so suddenly, it would be conceivable.”

“I’ll get an appointment tomorrow,” Al Parker promised and asked immediately: “And the second request?”

“What was the secret in the recording room yesterday afternoon?” The First Investigator looked at the producer provocatively. “Joan’s funny story with the autograph cards can hardly be considered credible. Unless you have an extremely low intelligence quotient.”

Al Parker was stunned. “So you actually listened in on us? I’ll have to digest that first.”

“Just tell us the full story, Al.” Jupiter went to the electric stove, got the soaked doll, and wrung it out over the sink.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Joan really didn’t give you a hard time about that. You have to believe me!” The producer’s voice rolled over with frustration.

“Come on, Al, what’s the point?” Pete asked. “Who gets three hundred thousand autograph cards printed? Prince doesn’t even have that many in stock!”

“How did you come up with such a large number?” Al replied, unsettled.

“Otherwise that should be the amount of money Jeffrey wanted to squeeze out of you,” Jupiter bluffed, loosening the wet threads of the rag doll holding its limbs together.

Suddenly a strangely sweet smell ran through the room. Pete’s fine nose instinctively registered that something was wrong. The Second Investigator had an unpleasant feeling. He turned around to the kitchen door and startled. At the entrance stood a stocky female figure hiding her face under a dark veil attached to an old-fashioned hat.

Al Parker and The Three Investigators jumped up in horror. Without saying a word, the person took short, hasty steps to the table and grabbed the rag doll out of Jupiter’s hands. Bob’s reaction was quick and unexpected. He jumped towards the figure and tried to tear down the veil with a jerk. Al Parker tried to intervene.

Horried, the mysterious figure retreated, lost its balance on its high heels and crashed her head against the metal trash can. She stayed there and didn’t move. Jupiter stared at the ground and slapped his hands on his head in horror!

10. Eavesdropping

“That’s Mrs Stevens! Mrs Stevens, say something!” Al Parker knelt down on the ground and felt the pulse of the woman in the accident. At that moment she flinched convulsively, and her claw-like left hand was groping across the parquet floor, while her right hand was still clutching the rag doll tightly.

“What’s wrong with her” Pete shouted with concern, and the woman’s ruffling sounds shivered coldly over his back. “She seems to be looking for something!”

Bob’s eyes wandered around and saw an unusual object right in front of his feet. He bent over and was just about to pick it up when the woman kicked him hard with her leg and a pleading wheeze came from her throat. Jupiter stared at a metal device on the ground and understood immediately.

Now the producer had also discovered the object, took it and placed it in the woman’s hand. “Do you think you can get up?” he asked.

Al Parker again received only a ruffling sound in response. Then he and the three detectives watched as the woman tightly hand-locked the metal device and pressed it sideways against her neck. Instantly, a robot-like distorted voice came out of the small device, screaming and pleading: “Help me up! I think I’ve twisted my foot!” The voice sounded so cold and tinny that Jupiter, Pete and Bob got goose bumps.

The producer and the First Investigator helped Mrs Stevens to stand up slowly. Bob pushed a chair over to her. He had become quite proficient at this sort of thing. “Come, Mrs Stevens. Slowly.”

Mrs Stevens sat down exhausted on the seat and held the rag doll in the air proclaiming disaster. “You disbelievers will never understand. What have gotten into you! How dare you tamper with the sacred body of Voodoo and put Mr Parker’s life in danger?”

Mrs Stevens’s left hand placed the speech-generating device on her lap and hastily stuffed back the straw hanging out of the doll with her fingers.

“So you’re Mrs Stevens, the anthropologist,” Jupiter noted, watching the old woman take the threads off the table and knot them back around the rag doll’s limbs. “Al’s already told us about you. You specialize in African-American religions, right?”

Mrs Stevens nodded silently and then pressed the device against her neck again. “You have disregarded the signs of the Voodoo gods and thereby angered them!” the voice came out of the device. “All you can do is pray that it’s not too late!”

“You scared the hell out of us,” Jupiter continued. “You came out of nowhere and ripped the doll out of my hands! Why didn’t you at least announce yourself by ringing the doorbell?”

Mrs Stevens grabbed the speaker again and pressed it against her neck. “Are you those Wet Boys?” The three detectives looked with astonishment at the old woman, who obviously didn’t seem to know much about music.

“Who are these three boys?” she asked again, this time directly to Al Parker.

“Interns!” Bob beat the stunned producer. “But actually, you should explain your strange behaviour to us first, before you ask us anything. You are lucky that you’re not hurt from your fall!”

"It seems to me unnecessary to exchange a single word with you at all." The old woman threatened. "My words are addressed solely to you, Mr Parker. I need to speak with you privately."

The producer looked at the three detectives in an unsettled manner, then turned to Mrs Stevens. "If your foot is better now, we can go to the music studio. The boys have to do some work here in the kitchen. We can talk undisturbed in the studio."

"Mind over matter," Mrs Stevens said, rising from her chair with a groan. "And the divine rule is never give up. Willpower is more than what some people think. All too often in my life I have experienced that one can overcome physical weaknesses with the power of faith. Only my voice... it was taken from me irrevocably. It will never return..." Mrs Stevens hooked into Al Parker and limped her way slowly into the music studio. The Three Investigators looked at the two in astonishment.

"The old woman is crazy!" Pete hissed at his friends. "And can anyone tell me what that black curtain means in front of her face?"

"It's part of a mourning dress," Bob told the Second Investigator in a whisper. "Al Parker told us she lost her husband a few weeks ago. She probably didn't get over the shock and she's still a little crazy!"

"Hey! Shh..." The producer suddenly appeared at the kitchen door and quietly approached the table. He turned to Bob in a whisper. "You know a lot about sound engineering, don't you?"

Bob nodded. "Sure!"

"My editing room is downstairs in the basement. There is a four-track recorder there. If you turn it on and press the microphone switch, you can listen to the conversation in the studio! That device is still intact. It used to be an intercom when I was training an apprentice years ago. I think you should hear what Mrs Stevens has to say to me!" Al Parker blinked conspiratorially at them. Then he took a quick look at his watch. "Goodness, it's four o'clock! Time for my afternoon tea!"

The producer hastily filled the kettle, placed it on the stove and pointed his hand at a door branching off from the hallway. Jupiter, Pete and Bob understood. Quietly, they crept out of the kitchen and carefully opened the basement door with a barely audible squeak. The First Investigator went ahead. He turned on the light switch and went down a metal spiral staircase with his two partners. In the editing room downstairs, it had a musty smell of stale tobacco smoke. The producer seemed to be down here a lot.

"Come on, Bob!" Jupiter urged them to hurry after they saw the equipment that were wired together on a large worktable. Four folding chairs leaned against the wall. Bob didn't have to search long until he found the main switch that powered up all the equipment. He activated the switch and after a short hum, all the operation lights lit up. With practised fingers, he tapped on the microphone buttons of the four-track recorder and carefully adjusted the volume as Mrs Stevens's electronic voice was heard through the speakers:

"Somebody's after your life, Mr Parker. The nature and approach are clearly consistent with the experiences and studies I have made in Haiti. The Voodoo priests punish in small stages. Little by little, they wear the victim down. In the beginning it is only slight pain that these dolls transfer to you. The air becomes scarce and then you sweat and suffer. But then the heart stings begin. The entire body musculature plays crazy and the pulse rate rises to the limit of what is bearable... Until the great Sandawe takes pity on the pain and then he stabs!"

"The great Sandawe?" asked Al Parker in a troubled voice. "Who's that? And what do you mean by stabs anyway?"

“Sandawe—the main god of the entire Voodoo religion—relies on the power of the needle. When the victim has suffered pain long enough, a needle is stabbed into the doll—right in the heart. The victim suffers with it—forever and ever.”

“You’re... you’re joking,” Al Parker tried to calm down.

“The Voodoo priests don’t joke, Mr Parker. The dolls that were given to you all had your face, and so a misinterpretation from my part is completely out of the question. The signs are blatantly clear. It’s very difficult for me to say, but I almost believe that your days are numbered.” Mrs Stevens cough came over heavily. The small loudspeaker of her speech device was not up to the enormous vibrations and began to rattle.

“But why?” Al Parker shouted hysterically. “Who benefits from taking me out this way?”

“You can only answer that question yourself. Have you ever treated anyone unfairly or threatened anyone in your life? Perhaps you have caused someone great harm at some time?”

“You asked me that before!” the producer shouted at Mrs Stevens uncontrollably. “And all I can say to you again and again is ‘No’! Of course, there were some small arguments here and there—private as well as business—but I have never consciously taken a human being for a ride, if that is what you mean!”

“Don’t yell at me,” Mrs Stevens rebuked him. “In my opinion, there can only be one reason for these Voodoo attacks. Someone is retaliating against you with all their might. I see only one possibility to put an end to the terror and to get you out of this safely. You must remember who you have harmed in your life.”

Jupiter, Bob and Pete sat spellbound in front of the speakers during the conversation. Suddenly they heard a whistle from above. The water in the kettle was boiling! The three detectives heard the producer apologize briefly and after a few minutes return to the studio with a clattering tray.

“I have something to show you,” came the voice of Al Parker. “The warning on this piece of paper here was attached to the doll that was brought to the boil on my stove just now. Read it!”

“I’m afraid I didn’t bring my glasses,” she said. “You have to read it to me.”

“No problem.” The producer took a sip of tea. Then he read the message to Mrs Stevens in a fragile voice:

*“Are you feeling a life of toil?
It’s the devil’s soup on the boil.
The night of death is about to call,
And the executor is the Voodoo doll!”*

“I can sense it...” The voice from the device came to a standstill.

“What have you got?” Mr Parker asked.

“This message, Mr Parker... this is not a warning,” Mrs Stevens said. “It’s an announcement!”

“An announcement? But for what?” The producer clattered nervously with the spoon in his cup.

“The announcement clearly states that the Voodoo avenger will strike at night,” Mrs Stevens said.

“So they really want to get to me...” Al Parker’s voice trembled. “This can’t be happening! These rag dolls can’t possibly have the power to take me out! How can this be explained logically?”

“There are more things between heaven and earth than our school wisdom can explain,” the old woman replied with another coughing fit.

“But these things don’t count for me!” Al cried. “I don’t believe in Voodoo magic and invisible phenomena!” A chair was pushed back, and footsteps were heard up and down the studio.

“Then you should put it to the test,” Mrs Stevens suggested.

“How should I go about that?” Al Parker stopped abruptly.

“Prepare all your rooms in the house with trip wires. If the intruder is indeed a human being, he will stumble and fall over the wires. Then you can bring the person to justice. But I’m afraid you won’t succeed with this method either.”

“Oh, yeah?” the producer asked suspiciously. “What do you mean by that?”

“You just try it out, Mr Parker. That’s all I can tell you. You’d probably doubt my state of mind—if you don’t already.”

“Is that all you have to say to me?” Al asked.

“Basically, yes...” Mrs Stevens hesitated for a moment. “Now I have a quick question.”

“Yes?”

“Those boys in the kitchen, are they really your interns?” Mrs Stevens asked.

Al Parker played the ignorant guy. “Of course. I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“I had this strange feeling when I met them in the kitchen. I have internal alarm bells, you know? And they only ring when there’s danger. My feelings rarely deceive me. Beware of those three. I wouldn’t give them too many glimpses into your privacy.” Mrs Stevens groaned and slowly rose from the chair.

“Don’t you want to finish your tea before you go?”

“Unfortunately I’m late,” the old woman apologized and stepped out of the hallway with limping steps. Al Parker followed her.

Now there was nothing more to be heard. Bob turned off the equipment. “Well, I’m starting not to understand anything anymore. What’s going on?”

“Before I give you an answer, Bob, I’d like to take another look at Mrs Stevens!” The First Investigator hurried up the spiral staircase, closely followed by Pete and Bob, and quietly opened the basement door. At the front door stood Al Parker, who already said goodbye to Mrs Stevens.

After she was on the street, the producer quickly closed the door and locked it—something which he normally would not do. Then he rushed towards The Three Investigators and said: “I hope you haven’t missed a word, boys. This Mrs Stevens is really something of a case in her own right.”

Before Jupiter, Pete and Bob could reply, a dark figure appeared through the frosted glass window of the front door. Al Parker turned impulsively and was startled.

11. Unexpected Visitors

The doorbell shrieked through the entire house. The producer ducked and hissed at the three detectives: "Get down! Fast! Everybody on the floor!" Jupiter, Pete and Bob followed the strange instructions without grasping the meaning and crouched quietly on the hallway carpet. The bell rang again. After there was no reaction, the door was vigorously knocked on from the outside.

"Al! You're home! Al, open up!" shouted the voice of a young man.

Jupiter squatted down and took a cautious look at the frosted glass window and recognized by the circumference of the shape that there were at least three people at the front door.

"Why don't you push the door handle?" one of the men suggested. It shook energetically at the door as the handle moved up and down.

"He's in the house. I saw that very clearly," a third man spoke. "He just said goodbye to that grandma."

"Since when is the door even locked? Something's wrong! Ring the bell again!" The bell was pressed again.

At that moment another figure appeared at the window. "Is there any trouble?" Al Parker and the three detectives looked at each other in surprise. The voice that had asked the visitors that question came unmistakably from a speech-generating device.

"The witch!" hissed the producer. "What's she still doing here?"

"Quiet!" Pete whispered with his finger on his lips.

"We wanted to see Mr Parker," one of the men replied to Mrs Stevens's question. "But for some unknown reason, he won't open the door."

"But that's strange," said the anthropologist. "Two minutes ago, I was talking to him. You wouldn't happen to be the Wet Boys, would you?"

"What makes you we are?" one of the men asked. "Are you with the press?"

"Leave the old grandma alone," the second man came in sharply. "What do we do now?"

"Don't answer a question with a question," the old woman said out of the speaker.

"Maybe he's in the bathroom?" The third man suspected and pressed his face against the window.

Al Parker crawled on all fours into a blind spot of the hallway as if bitten by a tarantula and did not dare to breathe.

"Something moved in there!" The face came off the window and someone knocked on the front door again. "Al, is that you? Al!"

"Can you tell us who those men are out there?" Bob whispered to the producer.

"Obviously, they've seen you a while ago. Don't you think it would be better to end this game of hide-and-seek?"

Al Parker hesitated. But then he stood up with great determination, straightened his shirt and opened the front door with a sigh. Jupiter, Pete and Bob had also risen and had a curious look at the three visitors who, as if to be taken for granted, stepped into the house.

Mrs Stevens remained at the doorstep. "These three young men seem to have something important to discuss with you. At the moment there seems to be a lot of interest in you. But

focus on the essentials, Mr Parker, and think about my words.” With that Mrs Stevens turned and limped away slowly.

“Hi, Al!” One of them, who looked like the youngest of the men, greeted Al and also gave a friendly gesture to the three detectives. “Why didn’t you open the door earlier or are we here at a bad time?”

“You have to excuse my behaviour.” Al Parker changed his mind. “I thought at first that there were some fans at the door. And I don’t need them here at all right now. I honestly didn’t expect you to show up.” The producer pointed to the three detectives. “May I introduce my new interns—George, Michael and Phil.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob grinned.

The first man asked, “Is this a gag?” exposing his yellow teeth, which were in a very bad condition.

“We wish it were,” Jupiter took over the answer.

Al Parker then introduced the visitors. “This is Luke, Bart and Frank. They are backup singers—the best backup to my stars.”

Jupiter blinked in confusion.

“They act, in other words, as a choir, George,” Bob explained to Jupiter.

“George is not stupid, Phil,” the Second Investigator got excited and scrutinized the three strange visitors in detail.

They were in their early twenties, and Luke, the man with the bad teeth, was obviously the youngest of the trio. His free forearm was decorated with the tattoo of a mermaid whose head was a little too big compared to her body. Otherwise he seemed quite likeable in his second-hand clothes and the old worn-out sneakers.

Bart, with a skinny figure and a height of two metres, reminded them of a giant. And although he seemed to be the oldest of the three, his face, covered with pimples all over, gave the impression that puberty simply didn’t want to say goodbye to him.

Frank’s appearance made the Second Investigator smile. He tried to conceal his full body with a T-shirt and sloppy trousers, both oversized. It could not be denied that there was a certain resemblance to the overweight figure of the First Investigator.

“Say, Al, was the veiled old woman with the rattling voice from the press or is she one of your relatives?” Luke asked with an ironic undertone in his voice.

“Nothing of the sort,” the producer tried to avoid the three visitors with a succinct explanation. “Mrs Stevens lives here in the neighbourhood. I think she’s been alone a lot lately and needs someone to talk to from time to time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bart said, pulling a few folded pieces of paper from the back pocket of his holey jeans. “We actually came to you because last night...”

“Can we talk about this in the studio right now?” Al Parker intervened and rubbed his hands in embarrassment. “I was just about to say goodbye to George, Michael and Phil.”

The Three Investigators struggled to hide their astonishment at the discreet but clear expulsion. The producer sent the three singers into the recording room and tried to justify his spontaneous decision with stammering words to Jupiter, Pete and Bob. “Please don’t take offence at me for putting you out so easily. But I’m afraid the next hour will be very unpleasant. The boys will want to negotiate with me about pay, and I can’t stand distractions.”

“It’s all right, Al,” Jupiter relented. “In the meantime, we’ll be on our way and take care of the wires.”

“Wires?” repeated the producer. “For what?”

"I think we should definitely heed Mrs Stevens's suggestion about the trip wires. Today's encounter with the Voodoo doll clearly indicates that an unknown person might appear in this house tonight. We will be prepared for this situation. If you don't mind, we'll come to you tonight, prepare the rooms with trip wires and lie in wait here in your house."

The producer's face darkened. "In theory, that sounds pretty good. But in practical terms, the matter could easily catch the eye. After all, this message is... a death threat!" Al Parker swallowed. "If the unknown person really has this in mind, I cannot possibly expose you to this danger."

"Do you have a better suggestion?" Bob asked.

The producer shrugged his shoulders and restlessly bobbed his foot. "I... I don't know anything right now. I have to think about it."

"Of course, there's still the possibility of notifying the police," Jupiter suggested. "But this seems to be the last of your options."

"Quite right," Al Parker confirmed. "Where the police are, the press isn't far away. And they will immediately tear me to shreds and accuse me that I am only after publicity! I can see the headline now—'Al Parker Under the Spell of Voodoo! Publicity Stunt or Insanity?'" He took a deep breath. "But if I have a choice between death and some negative press reports, then of course I choose the bad reputation."

"I believe you have no fear of premature death tonight, Al," Jupiter said. "This unknown Voodoo priest is clearly interested in something else. What good would it do to him if he got you out of the way? There's a purpose behind all these attacks. This person seems to want to achieve something very specific. In order to get to the bottom of this, we should strongly follow Mrs Stevens's suggestion." The First Investigator looked at the producer with his eyes wide open. "After all, we have nothing to lose."

Nervously, Al Parker bit his lower lip. He seemed to be engaged in an inner struggle for a decision. For a moment he was silent, then he looked at the three detectives resolutely.

"All right, then. Get the wires, guys! If someone actually shows up here tonight, we'll take him by surprise and bring him to justice. I must finally know who has this indescribable hatred of me!"

12. An Exciting Night

The Three Investigators said goodbye and stepped out into the street. The Second Investigator's MG parked across the street. After they got into the car and drove off, Bob came straight to the point.

"What kind of situation is this that goes in and out of Al Parker's house? Starting with the Wet Boys and their shady make-up artist Joan. Then this creepy anthropologist with her even creepier speech-generating device, all the way to the three backup singers who don't even seem to have money for decent clothes and visit Al to ask him for more money." Bob only now realized he hadn't buckled on yet. He quickly let the belt snap into place. "And Jupe, why did you look so funny when Al introduced us to Luke, Bart and Frank? Did you really not understand the concept of backup singers?"

"No!" The First Investigator shook his head. "I had something else on my mind—one thing that still concerns me and somehow doesn't let go."

"Then out with it! Don't take too long," Pete urged.

"It's that Frank," Jupe said. "He is kind of familiar, but I just can't figure out what is it."

"And what's so strange about that?" Pete asked. "Maybe you sat next to him at the movies or walked past him in the supermarket with your shopping cart."

"Sure," Bob said. "Something like this happened to Al Parker as well. Only he didn't just walk past Mrs Stevens in the supermarket, instead, he got to know her there."

"Heaven must have brought the two together," Pete said his thoughts. "Think about it—this poor guy gets harassed by a Voodoo fanatic and promptly runs into a professor whose main professional interest is exactly this topic! Is it chance, coincidence or fate?"

"Maybe none of these three," Jupiter thought. "I've been considering the possibility that Mrs Stevens herself is behind these attacks. Don't forget—immediately after the pot of water started to boil on the stove, she appeared in the kitchen. But then the question arises, what does she want from Al Parker? Finally, in their conversation, she pointed out to him that someone wanted to take revenge on him through these actions."

"Maybe she isn't acting on her own initiative, but only as a henchwoman," Bob continued the suspicions. "She may have been hired to do this by someone else."

"Suppose you're right about your theory and Mrs Stevens is actually behind this whole thing," Pete thought. "Then why would she recommend Al Parker lay out trip wires in his rooms? What's the point?"

"Whichever way you look at it, we will probably only find out the secret when we catch the bearer of the Voodoo dolls in the act," Jupiter said. "So the first thing we'll do is to go to a hardware store and get some rolls of wire and then we'll go home and get our sleeping bags."

"Man, convincing my parents that this overnight stay is urgently needed is going to be another act," Pete moaned. "It'll cost me at least thirty minutes of persuasion."

"Take it easy, Pete," Bob comforted. "I, too, will have to talk my head off. But at the end of the discussion, we will clearly emerge victorious, and that strengthens our self-confidence tremendously."

Around 8 pm, The Three Investigators arrived in front of Al Parker's house. As usual, the front door was opened and moved back and forth in the mild evening wind.

When Jupiter, Bob and Pete entered the music studio, the producer, with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, sat in front of his mixing console. The Wet Boys's remix came out of the loudspeakers, while his fingers kept turning the knobs to give the sound the finishing touch.

The First Investigator noticed with fascination that Al Parker was perfectly absorbed in his work. All fear and nervousness seemed to have disappeared from him. His foot swayed to the beat and his facial features were relaxed.

Finally, the producer finished his mix. "I have a bad feeling. And if I'm honest, it's even fear. Ever since this doll was in my pot, I have been constantly suffering from the illusion that someone is watching me all the time from all corners of this rooms. Tell the intruder to stay away from my house!"

"That's why you left your front door open again, right?" Jupiter asked carefully.

"I believe in positive energies," Al Parker replied. "... Even if for you this esoteric attitude does not fit the image of a successful music producer. It's my inner conviction."

The Three Investigators had nothing against it and so they proceeded to set up the trip wires in the house. Within an hour, the wires in Al Parker's bedroom, kitchen, studio and hallway were expertly stretched.

Jupiter, Bob and Pete had spread out their sleeping bags and pillows in the recording room and set up a cosy camp for the night. They had agreed that each of them should alternate two hours on guard throughout the night, while the others could sleep.

Around 11 pm, Al Parker started yawning. He had taken a glass of red wine, the calming and soporific effect of which quickly set in. But before he said goodnight to disappear into his bedroom, The Three Investigators and he once again inspected the premises of the entire house.

Pete's suggestion that the front door should perhaps be locked for the sake of general well-being was promptly rejected by the producer without discussion. Tired and sipping red wine, he retired to his bedroom.

Shortly thereafter, The Three Investigators switched off the lights throughout the house. Bob, as the three had decided, should begin the night watch. At that moment, Jupe and Pete kept Bob company, because sleep was out of the question for both of them.

When the wall clock struck one in the studio, Jupiter took over guard duty. So far nothing had happened, and it also did not seem as if anything extraordinary would happen that night. Bob and Pete had already fallen asleep and the First Investigator caught himself yawning at ever shorter intervals. He snuggled comfortably in his sleeping bag.

Just close your eyes once, he thought, just for a moment. How pleasant and peaceful would that be... He listened once more to the silence that had spread throughout the whole house. Nothing could be heard except the distant ticking of the wall clock and the regular breaths of his two friends. Jupiter closed his heavy eyelids and was deeply and firmly asleep within seconds...

Suddenly, a scream made the First Investigator suddenly jumped up. Where was he? There was absolute darkness around him.

"Jupe! Somebody's in the house!" Pete jumped out of his sleeping bag and felt for the light switch.

Al Parker screamed for help in his bedroom. Instinctively Bob had found the switch in the dark and turned it on. But everything remained dark. Pete remembered that the next light switch was on the right wall of the studio. Jupiter was looking for his flashlight in the dark. The producer still screamed for help as Bob and Pete fumbled forward to the second light

switch without falling over the trip wires. There! Bob beat Pete to it. His hand had finally found the switch and turned it on. It stayed dark.

“This devil has fixed the fuse box! All power’s off!” Bob’s voice rolled over in horror. “Where’s your flashlight, Jupe?”

“Wait... I’ll have it right away...”

Suddenly Pete’s hands tapped Bob’s shoulders. “Bob... look...”

A figure appeared in front of the two detectives. He sneaked out of Al Parker’s bedroom and moved towards the front door. Were the trip wires removed in the meantime?

“Hold it right there!” Al Parker was just a bundle of nerves and screamed with fear as if he was out of his senses. “Stop him! You must stop him!”

Determined to grab the intruder, who stood in front of him in the darkness about two metres away, Pete sprinted and ran towards the figure. He already thought he was sure of his target when he felt a drastic resistance at ankle level. He lost his balance, screamed and fell to the ground. Their own tripping hazard had decided the fate of The Three Investigators. As if the taut wires were not there for the intruder, the unknown figure ran towards the front door in the hallway and disappeared.

13. Jupiter Reveals his Suspicion

“Did you get him?” The cone of light from Jupiter’s flashlight wandered down the hall. Carefully, the First Investigator climbed over the trip wires and lit up Al Parker’s bedroom.

The producer sat in the back corner of his bed, bathed in sweat, looking at The Three Investigators with his eyes wide open. “A shadow...” he stammered. “The door opened quietly and I only saw a shadow.”

“Al, are you all right?” Carefully Jupiter approached Al Parker’s bed and shone his flashlight over the sheet. At the foot end there was a rag doll, again with the producer’s face painted on.

“I think... I think he tried to kill me.” Al Parker still didn’t dare to move. “This shadow... he raised his arms threateningly... came towards me... ever closer and closer... as if the trip wires didn’t exist at all... I screamed the soul out of my body... then I felt something being thrown into my bed.

“... At first I thought it was a poisonous animal... a tarantula or a scorpion... Then I noticed that it was another one of those terrible dolls... I trembled all over my body and even clattered my teeth... Then I tried to switch on the lamp on my bedside table. But everything remained dark...”

“That intruder must have been fiddling with the fuse box,” Bob said. “The power in the entire house has been cut off. I’ll check it out. Give me your flashlight, Jupe. Where’s the fuse box, Al?”

“In the broom closet in the hall!”

Bob had already disappeared. Al Parker was still as white as a sheet. “So he escaped you,” he said resignedly.

“I had almost grabbed this figure by the collar. But then I stumbled stupidly over our own wire traps,” the Second Investigator explained somewhat meekly.

At that moment the lights in the hallway went on and Bob came back into the bedroom. “As I had guessed, the circuit breakers have been switched off.”

“Aha,” Jupiter remarked dryly.

“What do you mean, aha?” Pete wanted to know and rubbed his aching knees.

“The fuse box is in the broom closet in the hall. I’ve never heard of that before, did you?”

“Sure, Jupe,” Bob replied. “But what are you getting at?”

“The intruder knew this house pretty well, or at least knew where the fuse box was,” Jupiter replied.

In the meantime, Al Parker had got out of bed and put on a red robe. Then he reached for the rag doll with pointed fingers and threw it at Jupiter.

“So you’re of the opinion that someone from my immediate vicinity is behind all this acts? A person who knows practically every corner of my house, because he could move freely and safely even in the dark.”

“That’s how it is,” the First Investigator replied. “But how can it be that our trip wires failed to stop the intruder?”

“They even landed me flat, although I knew exactly where we stretched the wires,” Pete added.

“The fact is, Mrs Stevens hit the bullseye with her prophecy. For this Voodoo freak, the trip wires were no obstacle. I just wonder how the old woman knew that.” Jupiter walked slowly towards Al Parker with the rag doll in his hand. “Behind these dolls is some secret. And I’m pretty sure it’s directly related to the Wet Boys’ secret!”

“What’s got into you now?” stammered Al Parker and buried his hands in the pockets of his robe. “Could you perhaps explain yourself more clearly?”

“Maybe we should go to the kitchen,” the First Investigator suggested. “I think it is best to settle the matter once and for all.”

“All right.” The producer slipped into his slippers, walked ahead and carefully climbed over the taut trip wires into the kitchen.

Before he sat down at the big table with Jupiter, Pete and Bob, he brought some water to boil on the electric stove and served his guests instant coffee. After all, the hands of the kitchen clock were already at five o’clock and outside sunrise was already visible.

“I’ve been wondering what’s wrong with the Wet Boys all along,” the First Investigator began his speech unsolicited and took a sip of coffee. “Because there’s something that became obvious during the photo session. Joan is clever and quick, but that silly excuse with the autograph cards only strengthened the suspicion that the four of them are blackmailing you with something that must not be allowed to get out in public under any circumstances.”

The producer’s lips narrowed to a line. “And if that were so, it wouldn’t be any of your business!”

“Mistake, Al,” Bob came to the aid of the First Investigator. “Because you gave us the assignment to investigate this case.”

“You should take care of the Voodoo dolls and find out who is staging all this terror! But I had not asked you to stick your nose into my business affairs!” Al Parker looked at the three angrily.

Jupiter looked the producer straight in the eye and said: “But I’m pretty sure the bearer of these dolls knows very well that Billy, Jeffrey and Hank—who are the Wet Boys in public—are not the real Wet Boys at all!”

14. Al Parker Confesses

Al Parker dropped his coffee mug on the table and stared at Jupiter in horror. “How did you know that?” he cawed.

The First Investigator visibly enjoyed this moment of surprise. Bob and Pete were also speechless about their partner’s statement. With open mouths they sat there and could hardly believe what they had just heard.

“At first it was just a mere suspicion,” Jupiter continued with his explanation. “However, it occurred to me when Billy, Jeffrey and Hank showed up at your studio the day before yesterday for the photographs. These slick guys in their fancy clothes and the stupid and arrogant things they said do not fit at all to the brash, cool and lifelike rap singing that is the trademark of the Wet Boys—real hip-hop.”

“So what?” Al Parker reacted harshly. “The boys sound a little different in their private lives than they do on their CDs. You should not take at face value everything that is presented to you. This is a completely different world. That’s show business!”

“That may be so,” Jupiter relented. “But you can’t make fools out of us. I’ve now completely understood why you didn’t want to open the door to your backup singers Luke, Bart and Frank yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh, yeah? I’m curious about that!” The producer crossed his legs and nervously fiddled with his fingernails.

“Don’t create unnecessary drama, Al!” the First Investigator went on the offensive. “After you threw us out so suddenly, I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that I’d run into Frank somewhere before. He seemed familiar to me, although I couldn’t recall what it is.”

“And that means something to a mastermind like Jupiter,” Bob interjected discreetly. “He usually never forgets anything.”

“Get on with it,” Al Parker said and gave Jupiter an unsettled look.

The First Investigator calmly put down his coffee cup. “For hours I pondered, until suddenly something hit me. I was thinking in a completely wrong direction. Frank’s overweight appearance, which is quite similar to mine, I certainly wouldn’t have forgotten so easily—if I had ever met him before.

“But that wasn’t the case. Because what seemed so familiar to me about Frank was not his appearance...” Jupiter made a skilful artistic pause. “It’s his voice! At first I wasn’t quite sure. But when we arrived here last night and you were doing the new remix on the mixing console, there was no doubt in my mind—Frank is the true lead singer of the Wet Boys! His voice is unmistakable!”

Pete’s eyes lit up. “Sure thing! And Luke and Bart are also part of it! These meaningless models Billy, Jeffrey and Hank only lip-sync on stage and in the video clips.”

“I can’t believe it!” Bob shouted excitedly. “So that’s where millions of teenagers get cheated! Now I realize why the three of them blackmailed you! If the con comes out, you can forget about the million-dollar Wet Boys deal.”

Al Parker sat sinking down on his chair and was no longer able to resist. “You’re right. And to be honest, I don’t know what to do anymore, because the hush money I have to throw down the throat of the four blackmailers is getting more every day.”

“What do you mean, four blackmailers?” Pete asked irritably. “Is the make-up artist also involved in this?”

The producer nodded. “Joan is Hank’s girlfriend, so she’s privy to everything. I even suspect this whole blackmail thing is her doing. This woman is ruthless. She would even go over dead bodies.

“In the beginning she only asked me to pay the three lip-sync models a small additional fee, because the costs for new clothes and the hairstylists were immensely high. I agreed with that. But one day she approached me and claimed that Jeffrey had almost talked himself away during a TV interview. With a little ‘raise’, as she called it, I could avoid that risk. I’m an idiot, of course. Since then, This pack has been on me mercilessly.”

“But I don’t understand why this whole con was staged at all. Bart, Luke and Frank can rap real good. Why didn’t you put these guys on stage?” Pete asked interestedly.

Al Parker cleared his throat. “That was the plan at the beginning. I recorded damn good demo tapes with the guys and sent them together with some photos to the record label. They really freaked out and asked me if I was kidding them.”

“Why’s that?” Pete wanted to know.

“You saw the boys, didn’t you,” the producer replied. “Bad teeth, big bellies and pimples do not fit into the picture that teenagers dream of. At least that’s what the top bosses of my record label think.

“Well, when I told Bart, Frank and Luke about this fiasco, they were not as disappointed as I had feared at first. The boys’ main concern was to translate their thoughts, fears and worries into music. The trio didn’t like the idea of presenting themselves to an audience of millions. When I suggested that I put three tanned models on the cover, they even found the idea quite funny and agreed to it without problems.”

“The title of the single hit ‘It’s All on the Surface’ hits the nail on the head with this story,” Bob remarked ironically. “What’s the next step?”

“I don’t know,” the producer admitted desperately. “I would love to completely abandon the Wet Boys project and start something new with Frank, Luke and Bart. Maybe I should just look for another record label where not so ossified views are represented and where real hip-hop rappers get a real chance. Then Billy, Hank, Jeffrey and Joan could watch them get their money’s worth.”

Jupiter took the last sip from his coffee cup and made a thoughtful face. “Al, if I understand you correctly, you have always followed the blackmailers’ demands for money, right?”

The producer nodded.

“And how about Frank, Luke and Bart?” Bob joined in. “Have you ever had money problems with them?”

“Absolutely no!” the producer exclaimed. “The three of them are so modest, you almost have to force their fees on them.”

“Then there must be another person behind the attacks with the Voodoo dolls,” Jupiter suspected. “Because according to Mrs Stevens, the Voodoo fanatic’s point is to finally get justice. You must have cheated someone in your past. And I’m pretty sure it’s directly related to the Wet Boys.”

Al Parker shook his head. “That’s impossible! How did you come to this absurd assumption?”

“My suspicion does not seem wrong to me,” the First Investigator replied confidently. “I’ve come to believe that our grieving Mrs Stevens is involved! And before you contradict me now, can you tell me where this fake anthropologist stays?”

“Fake anthropologist? Now you’re clearly going too far!” An angry blush went to the producer’s face. “The old woman has been through a lot in her life! She deserves more respect!”

“Then where does she live?” Jupiter repeated his question.

“I can’t tell you that... exactly,” Mr Parker replied. “Somewhere here in the neighbourhood. I don’t have her exact address. What do you want from her?”

The First Investigator straightened up. “This woman is taking you for a ride. We found out that she made a fatal mistake.”

The producer looked at the First Investigator with astonishment.

“Yesterday, she said that ‘Sandawe—the main god of the entire Voodoo religion—relies on the power of the needle’,” Jupiter stated. “Those were her exact words. However, Bob did some checks on this. I’ll let him explain it to you.”

“Okay, Sandawe is not even a god of any religion,” Bob said. “It is actually the name of an indigenous ethnic group in Southeast Africa.

“In fact, even earlier, we had doubts that Mrs Stevens is a genuine anthropologist. The reason is that what she told you yesterday about the Voodoo spell and the doll contradict the actual practice of the Voodoo religion. Much of what she said are just myths created by the media and movies to depict the religion negatively.

“Therefore, we can see this situation in two ways. Firstly, Mrs Stevens is not a real anthropologist, since she is not telling you the truths about Voodoo. Secondly, if she really is an anthropologist, then she is using the myths to scare you, meaning that she has an ulterior motive to do so.”

“In my opinion, Mrs Stevens is much more interested in American hip-hop!” Jupiter interrupted.

“What?” Pete stared at Jupiter. “How did you come up with this nonsense?”

“That’s no nonsense at all,” Jupiter replied calmly. “Didn’t you wonder how Mrs Stevens in the kitchen, totally taken out of context, asked us if we were the Wet Boys? When we didn’t give her an answer, she got really mad?”

“That’s right,” Bob would have to admit and rubbed his tired eyes.

“When she met Luke, Frank and Bart at the front door yesterday, she wanted to know exactly the same about the three of them. I suspect she’s trying to find out who’s behind the Wet Boys.”

“Who’s behind the Wet Boys?” Bob repeated. “You mean that Mrs Stevens knows that there are the real Wet Boys behind the official Wet Boys, but she doesn’t know who they are?”

“Exactly!” The First Investigator looked superior around the room. “But I suspect she’s trying to get that information for someone else. Probably it is for the unknown person who wants this information to blackmail Al Parker, and who wants to bring him to his knees with the Voodoo spell act.”

“But so far there has been no demand behind the Voodoo attacks,” noted the producer.

“That will come. I’m quite sure of that,” Jupiter said. “If we can’t get to Mrs Stevens, it would be very helpful if you could dig into your memory. Maybe there’s someone who would do all this stage magic to intimidate you.”

Al Parker closed his eyes and thought hard. “I’m really sorry, guys, but I think you’re on the wrong track with your guesses. As much as I think about it, I really wouldn’t trust anyone to do these lousy attacks.” He got up. “Do you want some more coffee?” When the three said no, he took his cup and went to the stove.

Suddenly the music producer cried out. The kettle slipped from his hand, hot water splashed and the kettle crashed on the floor.

“Needle! William Needle!” Al Parker ran to the sink and let cold water run over his hands. “How could I forget Needle! William Needle!”

15. Who is William Needle?

“Who on earth is William Needle?” Bob asked.

The producer returned to the kitchen table and dropped onto the chair. “Well, how do I explain this to you?”

“Just try it,” Pete suggested encouragingly.

“A year ago, I met this guy in the sauna. You know, every Thursday, 4:30 pm, it’s my sauna day. You can set the clock according to that.”

“We know that.” The First Investigator urged him to hurry. “Keep it coming!”

“Well, I started talking to this man and during the conversation it seemed that we had a lot in common. When I told Needle that I was a music producer, he was excited and asked me if he could visit me in my studio, because he was very interested in this profession. I didn’t mind, of course, and I made an appointment with him the next day.”

“And then what?” Pete asked impatiently.

“That’s actually a long story. William came into my studio and had thousands of ideas that he wanted to put into music.”

“What were those ideas?” Bob interrupted and got a reproachful look from Pete.

“Well,” the producer corrected. “Actually, they were more like suggestions. Suggestions of lyrics for country music—but I had already said goodbye to that. I made that clear to him and instead showed him the rough drafts of my latest project—the Wet Boys’s second studio album. William Needle was immediately hooked. He immediately complained that he was unemployed and would like to look over my shoulder during his free time. Since I liked him, I had nothing against it. And that almost cost me my head!”

“What do you mean?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“Well,” Al Parker continued. “Over time, I gave William Needle ever deeper insights into the project and suddenly he began to criticize my work in the worst possible way. My lyrics were allegedly lousy, the harmony in the music sounded unprofessional and the trend would be completely wrong in terms of taste!”

“You didn’t put up with that, did you?” Pete cried.

“Too long, unfortunately,” confessed the producer. “But one day I couldn’t stand the negative energy around me. I just threw this guy out the door.”

“A good decision,” Jupiter said.

“As you put it, Jupiter. Because one day, about four weeks later, I received a copy of a strange letter from the record label. The letter was sent to them from, would you believe it, William Needle.”

“What did the letter say?” Pete wanted to know.

“It’s hard to believe. In the letter, William Needle said firmly that he was significantly involved in the second Wet Boys CD and that the project would never have come about without his help. He claimed that there was an agreement between him and me in which I would have promised him fifty percent of all profits received.”

“You gotta be kidding me!” Pete was stunned and nibbled on his thumbnail.

“That’s what I thought at first. But William Needle was serious. In the letter he even dared to make the claim that seventy percent of the Wet Boys CD was attributed to his

cooperation. According to his calculation, I only had a thirty percent share in the entire production!”

“A typical case of delusions of grandeur and abuse of friendship!” Bob blew his excitement. “How did it end?”

“My record label has fortunately stood behind me and vehemently denied William Needle’s demands,” Al Parker said. “But that didn’t do much good, because the project was put on hold at the same time. I have the master cassette in the drawer and still haven’t got it out to this day.”

“Why is that?” Pete asked surprised.

“From a legal point of view, I was no better off,” Al Parker replied. “If this CD had been released, he could have obtained an injunction to have it withdrawn from the market until the legal situation had been settled. And you know how long lawsuits can take. It wasn’t worth all the effort.

“So finally, I decided to start a completely new Wet Boys project and William Needle went away empty-handed. But this bloodsucker still wasn’t satisfied with that! One day, he showed up at my studio and asked me to pay him two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!”

“What’s that for?” Bob grabbed his head in disbelief.

“In his opinion, that would have been the minimum share he would have received if this CD had been released,” Al explained.

“But that’s insane!” Pete shouted.

“And that’s why I now believe that that guy has something to do with the Voodoo dolls!” Al said. “In William Needle’s eyes, I am a person who had deprived him of a fortune—a fortune that he was not entitled to and that never really existed.”

The First Investigator tried to get a factual tone of voice. “To what extent was Needle privy to the secret that there are two sets of Wet Boys, so to speak?”

“We never actually talked directly about this and Needle never met the boys personally—neither the lip-sync models nor the true performers,” Al Parker explained. “But he must have smelled something wrong with his fine nose. When he showed up later and demanded the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars from me, he announced that he still had a trump card in his sleeve, which he would only play against me at the end. I thought it was a bluff and I sent him out of my house once and for all.”

“So this master cassette that was put on ice at the time is still in your possession, right?” Bob went after it with interest.

“Yes, indeed,” confirmed the producer. And as if it had been an invitation, he left the kitchen and rushed with hasty steps into his music studio. Jupiter, Pete and Bob followed him. Al Parker walked up to a cabinet, opened a drawer and backed away in horror seconds later. “That devil...” he stammered. “That cursed devil!”

“I assume the cassette’s gone. Am I right?” Jupiter came one step closer.

The producer opened more drawers in bewilderment and came to the bitter conclusion that Jupiter was correct.

The master cassette was gone. With trembling fingers, Al Parker reached for his tobacco pouch. He was so tensed that he barely managed to roll a cigarette.

“Where does this guy live, Al?” Jupiter asked. The producer was now so mentally absent that the First Investigator had to repeat his question.

“Two blocks away,” it came faltering over his lips. “Lear Road. House number 17... if I recall correctly.”

Jupiter took a look at the wall clock and said calmly: “We’ll have breakfast in peace of mind now, Al. Food holds body and soul together.”

The producer hastily pulled out his cigarette. "I'm not gonna get a bite down!"

"You gotta keep a cool head now!" Bob called Al Parker to his senses.

"What good is that to me?" he replied, upset. "My hands are tied! I'm surrounded by vampires who suck me all out! And there's nothing I can do about it."

"Wrong, Al," Jupiter rubbed his hands. "After breakfast, we'll get up close and personal with your former associate, William Needle. And if he really is behind these sneaky Voodoo attacks, he will get a shock of his life!"

16. In the Doll Workshop

At 7 am, Jupiter, Pete and Bob arrived at Lear Road in front of the house number 17. A yellowed sticker, on which the name 'Needle' was scribbled with a felt-tip pen, stuck next to the bell button.

Without hesitation, the First Investigator pressed the bell. The Three Investigators were actually expecting it to take some time for Mr Needle to get himself out of bed. To their astonishment the door was opened after only a few seconds. In front of them stood a stocky man whose sparse hair growth and eye-catching designer glasses immediately stood out. He was dressed in a blazer and carried a small briefcase under his arm. Apparently, he was on his way out.

"Yes?" he asked curtly, hardly giving them a glance.

"Good morning," Jupiter played in his friendliest tone. "Are you Mr William Needle?"

The stocky man winked nervously with his eyes. "What business is it of yours?"

With an exaggerated gesture, Pete pulled a pencil notepad out of his jacket pocket.

"We're coming from the school paper, and we're doing a poll. So let's just ask one question: 'Do you know the Wet Boys?'"

William Needle reacted immediately. "Let's cut the kid stuff, boys. Al Parker sent you to me. Is that right?"

"What makes you think so?" Pete asked perplexed.

"I'm not stupid, and I'm still able to add one and one together. Unfortunately, I must disappoint you. You won't get any information out of me. The steps I'm about to take against Al Parker are between him and me. The law is on my side." William Needle reached for his front door key and stuck it into the lock from the outside.

"Don't you think there's still an amicable solution?" Bob asked carefully.

"I don't understand what you're getting at," Mr Needle replied harshly, "I have an appointment with my lawyer at eight o'clock. He'll draw up a document for me that I'll hand over to Al Parker in person. That scoundrel can then figure out how to get out of it. That's not my problem anymore. Tell him that, please."

He closed the door behind him and turned the key to lock it. Then he went to his car and roared away with squeaking tyres. The three of them looked at the car until it disappeared in the distance.

"This ice-cold fish has turned us down," Bob said, outraged. "What are we going to do now?"

"Stand behind me and back me up, fellas." Pete pulled his bunch of lock picks out of his pocket and, before Jupiter and Bob could reply, pushed one of them expertly into the lock of William Needle's front door. Bob looked around anxiously in all directions. To reassure him, he found that there were no curious passers-by on the street at that early hour.

With a quiet click, the front door opened. A smile scurried over Pete's face before he and his friends entered the house inconspicuously and closed the door behind them. The soft carpet swallowed every step they took as they entered the living room which was sparsely furnished. They looked around with interest.

In one corner were some dumbbells on the floor. Next to it stood a yucca palm tree in a brown clay pot, which had apparently not been watered for a long time. Other than that, it looked like any other typical living room. There was nothing really suspicious. They then walked into the hallway.

On the left was a door. It was unlocked so they opened it and saw a work table in the middle. Curiously, The Three Investigators went closer and looked with horror at the equipment lying neatly on the table top—four pieces of jute fabric tailored to the size of a dish towel, two spools of brown cotton yarn, needles, scissors and a basket of straw.

“Fellas...” Jupiter barely dared to breathe. “We are in the middle of a Voodoo priest’s cave. This is his doll workshop! So William Needle is actually behind this. This person must be really sick.” The First Investigator reached for a jute cloth and let it slide through his fingers.

“Jupe,” warned Pete. “You better not touch any of this. Probably this guy notices immediately that we were in his house, even if only one of these parts was shifted by a bit!”

Bob looked around the floor and saw a black, long wooden box, the lid of which was closed. He walked towards it, knelt on the floor, and carefully opened the lid. He took a look inside the box and froze.

“Jupe... Pete...” Bob’s voice trembled. “That... I don’t think... Look at that...”

The First and Second Investigators came closer with a beating heart and looked at the contents of the box with horror.

In it lay a black lace dress and a grey-haired woman’s wig, on which a small hat with a black veil was stuck. Next to it stood a pair of brown high heels. Half covered by a black leather bag was a small plastic box. In it was a labelled DAT cassette—Al Parker’s master cassette.

“I don’t believe it.” Pete looked with disbelief at the clothes, from there was a strange sweet smell of rose. He then looked at his friends with irritation. “William Needle and Jessica Stevens are one and the same person! I never would have thought of that in my life! This guy has squeezed himself into women’s clothes and in this disguise is trying to convince Al Parker that he’s dealing with an experienced anthropologist who can protect him from the evil spells.”

“Protect my foot,” corrected Jupiter. “Jessica Stevens’s role was intended solely to convince Al Parker of the Voodoo spell and make him submissive.”

“But what for?” Bob asked.

“It’s obvious. Again and again William Needle, in the anthropologist’s mask, stressed that Voodoo terror can only be averted when Al Parker finally pays off an old debt. William Needle hoped that the producer would meet his alleged payment obligations.”

“This is absolutely illusory,” Pete interjected. “If Al Parker had known earlier that William Needle was behind this Voodoo story, he would have seen through the whole magic from the beginning and not attached the slightest importance to these funny rag dolls.”

“I’m not sure about that. But right now I’m much more interested in what’s in that bag.” Jupiter reached into the wooden box and pulled the small black leather bag out of it. Curiously, he shook the entire contents onto the carpet. “What have we here?”

In addition to a few small glass bottles, there was also a small metallic box-like device, which was clearly the indispensable accessory for the Jessica Stevens disguise.

Bob took the speech-generating device in his hand and looked at it closely from all sides. “This clever fox has really thought of everything! Of course, he had to assume that Al Parker would recognize his voice. With this device here, he had cleverly solved the problem!”

Meanwhile, Jupiter reached for one of the glass bottles that had also fallen out of the bag and curiously inspected the label. “That rat!” Jupe exclaimed. “That miserable rat!”

Pete and Bob looked at Jupe questioningly. “What have you got there, Jupe?”

Jupiter held the little bottle against them. “This highly explosive content will make William Needle go to prison for a few years!”

Bob also reached for a bottle. The label said ‘Panipharm’. He passed it on to Pete. The Second Investigator opened the screw cap and held his nose to the opening “My general education is not good in this case, Jupe. Could you explain to us what this bottle contains? ‘Panipharm’ doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Uncle Titus got this same prescribed drug a few months ago. I must confess that I can’t tell you much about the composition, but I’m familiar with the applications and effects.” The First Investigator grabbed the leather pouch and let the speech-generating device and the medicine bottles disappear into it again.

“Then don’t take too long to tell us, Jupe,” Pete urged. “I want to get out of this creepy chamber as soon as possible!”

“‘Panipharm’ is usually administered to patients suffering from low blood pressure,” Jupiter explained in a school-masterly tone. “This drug gets the heart pump going again and the blood circulation back on track. But you have to take the prescribed dose, else it would result in horrendous symptoms.”

“It’s slowly dawning on me,” Pete murmured. “Al had those symptoms!”

“So the contents of these vials caused Al to panic. William Needle sent the producer on a horror trip with the combination of Voodoo Dolls and Panipharm!” Bob said.

“You got it!” Jupiter praised his two fellow detectives. “The only question is how this man did it such that effect of the drug kicks at the exact moment Al came into contact with the dolls. But that’s not the only mystery.”

The First Investigator took a worried look at the watch. “We don’t have much time before William Needle arrives at Al Parker’s house, we have to be there! I have a sure feeling this lunatic is going on the offensive today. And this is our opportunity to convict Needle and deliver him to the police!”

“And how shall we do that, Jupe?” Bob wanted to know. “Knowing you, you’ve already come up with a sure-fire plan.”

Jupiter smiled triumphantly. “William Needle will regret that he abused the Voodoo religion for his materialistic purposes! I think it’s time to let this unscrupulous criminal feel for himself what it means to be truly afraid.”

Pete felt uncomfortable at the thought. “We shouldn’t overdo it, Jupe. I don’t believe in this magic, but I have a certain respect for it. Even if William Needle is fooling around with this religion, we should not be like him.”

“I can calm you down, Pete.” Jupiter was confident. “The Voodoo gods will be eternally grateful to the three of us for putting a stop to a charlatan like William Needle once and for all.”

“And how do we do it this time?” Bob asked.

“We just reach into the box of tricks and give him a taste of his own medicine!” Jupiter announced. “But I have something to check with Uncle Titus first!”

17. Showdown

Al Parker got really nervous the next morning. After Jupiter, Pete and Bob had told him the abyss they found in William Needle's house, a heavy burden fell from his soul. Nevertheless, he was overcome with great restlessness when The Three Investigators brought him into their plan to bring down his insidious adversary once and for all. They only had time to briefly tell Al what to do and promised that they would let him in on the details later.

The wall clock in the studio just struck nine o'clock when the Second Investigator, holding watch at the window, jumped to the side in a flash and gave the alarming sign—"William is coming!"

Pete and Bob crawled into the lower shelf cupboards, which the producer had emptied especially for this purpose, and pulled the doors shut except for a small gap. Al Parker sat down at his mixing console and played the new remix of the Wet Boys as usual. He made great efforts to put on a relaxed face.

At that moment William Needle entered the studio and stopped in the middle of the room. "Hi," it came expressionlessly over his lips.

The producer turned around in his armchair, trying his best to act surprised. "William, what are you doing here?"

Needle remained motionless in the room. "What do you think I am here for?"

Al Parker stopped the music. "I think so, but I honestly can't understand why you're still holding on to that old story. Why don't you just let go and do more important things than mourn an illusion."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars is not an illusion for me, Al. And I will get my money—you have no choice." William Needle showed no emotion at all.

"You'll have to be a little more specific if you want me to understand you," Al said. "Can I get you some black tea?"

William Needle slowly approached. "You're still the same old man. At nine o'clock in the morning, you still have your tea ceremony."

"People don't change, William," Al said. "You know that. Why should they? So what is it? Tea?" Invitingly, Al Parker lifted the pot.

"Why not? But only half full."

The producer took out two identical cups, poured in equal amount of tea and pushed one cup to William Needle. "You speak in riddles and still haven't answered my question."

"I've waited long enough for this day, Al," William Needle said. "You can believe that. A few minutes more or less isn't important anymore." William Needle reached for his cup. "Do you have any sugar?"

"Sure thing." Al Parker got up from his chair and went into the kitchen. From their hiding place, Pete and Bob watched in horror as William Needle looked around carefully and pulled a small bottle out of his vest pocket. He unscrewed the cap and tipped the entire contents into the producer's cup. Then they heard Al Parker coming back.

"I was beginning to think I was running out of sugar. But there was another package on the shelf!" Al Parker returned to his swivel chair, while William Needle dropped two cubes of sugar into his cup.

“You can throw two cubes in for me too,” the producer said loosely. “If you’re looking for a spoon, there’s a cutlery tray in that drawer over there behind you.”

William Needle turned around and walked over to the drawer. “I want the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Al. I’m not getting out of here till I do.” He came back with the spoon, stirred his tea and took a sip.

“You can wait a long time,” Al Parker replied calmly and put his cup on his lips as well. “I don’t know how you could get me to do that either.”

“Oh, no?” William Needle smiled smugly and opened with slow movements the small briefcase which he held with a firm grip in his left hand. He pulled out a small rag doll whose face depicted the face of Al Parker.

The producer stared at William Needle stunned with his mouth wide open. “So you’re behind this, Needle! How could you get involved in such a hideous thing?”

“I am in league with the devil. Didn’t you know that? I want my compensation, Al! Compensation for the dreams and hopes that you have awakened in me and then destroyed them! I begged the great Sandawe and asked him for his help. It is in your hands whether the Voodoo god will execute the sentence.” William Needle pulled a folded paper from the inside pocket of his vest and pushed it over Al Parker’s table.

“What’s that?”

“A declaration that you will sign for me. For two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, you can buy your guilty conscience back.” William Needle handed the producer a pen.

“I don’t feel guilty about you, Needle. You have trampled on my openness and trust. You have no feeling. I don’t owe you anything.”

“Oh yes, you do. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Al. Else, it would be a pleasure for the great Sandawe to take you to the afterlife.” Slowly and with pointed fingers, William Needle grabbed his vest pocket and pulled a long sewing needle out of it. At that sight, Al Parker began to wheeze.

“I’m gonna stick the needle in the doll, Al. Slowly and with great pleasure.”

The producer’s gasping became more and more violent. “Leave me alone, Needle. I can’t breathe!”

William Needle brought the long needle closer and closer to the doll. “You will die if you don’t sign, Al. You will perish in agony...”

Pete and Bob were able to follow every detail from their hiding place and watch, bathed in sweat, as Al Parker unfolded the document and slowly unscrewed the cap of the pen.

At that moment, William Needle’s body went through a strong twitch. Squeaking, the door of the recording room opened, and appeared a figure in a black dress, whose face was hidden under a dark veil.

“Mrs Stevens!” Al Parker screamed. William Needle turned around, startled.

“That’s right,” it came out of the speech-generating device. On her high-heeled shoes, the figure slowly approached and moved towards William Needle. In her hands she held another rag doll and a long needle. “William Needle! You have angered the spirits of Voodoo... And you’ll pay for that!”

Suddenly, William Needle grabbed his chest heavily breathing and struggled for air. “No... No!” he cried. “What’s happening!”

The figure laughed angrily. “The gods get angry when unbelievers use his religion and his symbols! You have abused the power of Voodoo spells and the dolls!”

William Needle sank to his knees, still clutching his chest and almost seemed to suffocate.

“Do you feel the pain of your victim on yourself?” the tinny voice came out of the device. “I’ll stick the needle in the doll if you don’t talk!” The figure came closer and closer.

“Wha... What do you want to know?” William Needle screamed out of his mind.

“Admit that you are behind all these attacks on Al Parker to enrich yourself!” the figure cried. “Admit it now!”

The pain was so sudden and intense that he did not know what else to do but to succumb to the pressure. “Yes! Yes! I admit it,” Needle shouted. “Just go away! Get away from me!”

“Thank you very much,” Jupiter said and pulled the wig with the veil off his head.

William Needle lay bewildered on the ground. Now two investigators crawled out of the cupboard.

Bob had a voice recorder with him. “I’ve recorded all that needs to put him away,” he said with a smile. “... Both his last attack on Al, and his confession.”

All three of them noticed that the drug’s effect on William Needle was still very noticeable and was much more intense than that for Al Parker previously. Needle’s body was still shaking profusely, and he had tears in his eyes.

Moaning, the First Investigator got rid of the black dress, which still had the sweet smell of women’s perfume on it, and slipped out of the uncomfortable high heels.

Pete found himself laughing in front of Jupiter. “If Aunt Mathilda could see you like this, Jupe! In that dress, you almost look like her younger sister!”

Jupiter took a look at the wall clock and grinned. “It’s almost ten. This is exactly the right time to disturb Inspector Cotta during his breakfast break. I will call him now and tell him to take William Needle in for questioning immediately! He can pick him up right here!”

18. Al Parker Starts Afresh

Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department came with two policemen. He took statements from Al Parker and The Three Investigators. Bob also handed Cotta the voice recording. A while later, they left with Needle.

“You did a great job! All three of you! Congratulations!” Al Parker walked up to the three and embraced each one in turn enthusiastically.

The First Investigator beamed. “I can only return that compliment, Al! As skilfully as you exchanged the two tea cups, that deserves a lot of respect!”

“Your luck, Al!” Pete exclaimed. “William Needle poured a whole bottle of Panipharm into your cup. I thought he was gonna kill you!”

“No, Pete!” Jupiter said. “Panipharm is in no way lethal!”

“But why was this high dosage necessary?” Pete asked.

“I can explain that.” Jupiter said. “Uncle Titus told me this—if you pay attention to the exact number of drops, usually ten, the heart pump starts to trot after thirty to forty-five minutes. By adjusting the dosage, you could estimate the time it takes to take effect.

“But today William Needle wanted the effect to come faster. According to Uncle Titus, for that kind of overdose, you would quite quickly find that your heart palpitates and you gasp for breath. But the hectic breathing only worsened the situation, as the oxygen content of your blood would increase rapidly. This phenomenon is called hyperventilation. The very high oxygen level in the blood would cause nausea, dizziness and a feeling of being close to fainting, which usually makes the panic even worse!

“In the previous cases, he could always rely on the onset of heart palpitations on time. This exact time allowed him to plan in advance when he would have to pass the dolls to you, Al.”

“Okay, even that, how did he come up with all the attacks. It looked so random to me,” Al said. “Now I need to know all the details you promised me.”

“Bob has all the cases summarized,” Jupiter said. “I’ll let him continue.”

“The most obvious things always come a little later!” Bob took his turn to explain. “Talking about the previous cases, if you recall and analyze them, you would actually notice a trend. It now looked straight-forward because you have fixed times when you take your drinks. Needle knew that in advance and drugged your drinks, timed it, and then introduce the dolls when the drug kicks in. However, if you look at it carefully, it was very well planned.”

Bob then took out his notebook, flipped a few pages in and continued: “I have recorded seven instances where you encountered a doll. In four of these cases, you also suffered heart palpitations. I can now explain most of it because you have fixed times taking your tea—at 9 am and 4 pm every day without fail.”

“Needle also knew that at those times, you only take green tea, but most of your guests didn’t like it. So he could be pretty sure no one else drank that. Now the dolls that appeared in the parcel and sauna were timed after your tea at 9 am and 4 pm respectively.

“The case of the doll on the bed, I can believe now that he drugged your wine. He knows that every night before you go to sleep, you drink a glass of red wine—without fail again.

“For three of the cases where you did not suffer palpitations—they did not involve any drinks—including the time we brought the doll back to you.

“But I can’t figure out the time when the doll was boiling on the stove. Al hadn’t taken any tea before that. I know that it was only 3 pm then,” Bob recalled.

“But at that time of day I drink a small pack of milk a day,” the producer explained.

“And William Needle will have known that habit as well,” the First Investigator suspected.

Bob continued: “So now I can conclude by saying that spiking the tea bags, milk pack and wine before every attack was no problem either, since the front door is always opened. In addition, he knows that Al is almost always in his music studio with the ‘Recording’ light on.”

“There’s one thing though,” Pete said. “How did he do the trick on getting the pot to boil on the stove with the doll in it.”

“I can answer that,” Jupiter said. “I did check on your stove, Al. It has a built-in timer. He simply got into the house earlier, set the timer, and put on a filled pot with the doll in it.”

“Well, what a thing to do for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!” Bob remarked.

“Incredible!” Al asked. “May I ask one more question, Jupiter?”

“Go ahead, Al!” Jupe replied.

“How did Needle get over the trip wires in the dark?”

Now it was Pete’s turn as he blinked at Al Parker. “Do you ever go to the movies in your spare time?”

“Frankly, I’d rather watch videos,” the producer replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Have you seen the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* with Jodie Foster? In it she was chased in a dark basement by a man who could track her down despite absolute darkness.”

“How was that possible?” Al asked. “I haven’t seen that movie.”

“The man had a special item with him that we also found in William Needle’s black box—infra-red goggles! A top-class night-vision device! With that Needle had succeeded in tricking us!”

Al Parker was thrilled with the conclusion of this case. “I’ll talk to Bart, Luke and Frank on the phone afterwards! The Wet Boys are simply dumped out of the programme. I’m going to go do a new thing with the backup boys! All I need is a catchy name.”

The producer looked at Jupiter, Bob and Pete questioningly. “What do you think of ‘The Three Investigators’?”

Jupiter waved away promptly. “Forget it, Al! This name is protected! We have a lifetime copyright on it!”